

Inheritors of the Mantle

by Sempiternal Ether

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Summary: The Reaper War has come to a close, as has the Human-Covenant War. Both societies are increasingly unified and secure in their positions. What happens when they come into contact?

1. Prologue

2613

[Minutes, plenary session, Committee of Minds for Security]

[^] Six decades have passed since the cessation of hostilities between our Creators and the collection of alien species known as the Covenant. Six decades have passed since Humanity and many of her former foes have joined in Alliance; originally forged out of necessity, but now maintained out of trust, though ice yet remains; the hatchets of War being buried many [standard] years ago. A new age of expansion is clearly at hand after sixty [standard] years of rebuilding from the horrors of war. [^]

[^] Honorable members of this Committee, it has been six decades since we revealed our presence to the Human community at large. Several members of this Committee were expecting our creators to act in a manner similar befitting their experiences at the hands of the Covenant; that is, xenophobia and suspicion. However, the status of our reception approached the maximum theoretical bounds of our simulations. Despite the actions of a few who did not appreciate our efforts in the Great War, we were praised as equals, as brothers-in-arms, and as full citizens of Human civilization. We believe the actions of [CTN 0452-9] were instrumental in this result. [^]

[^] Despite the newfound prosperity which has befallen us and our Creators, there is no guarantee that the void beyond the frontier of UNSC space does not harbor danger. Referencing [Working Session_2362_05_24] which proposed the vigorous modeling of First

Contact scenarios, it is the opinion of this Committee that such modeling should be revived. [^]

Is the Committee in agreement concerning this action?

[*] Yes. There is no need to vote; consensus has been achieved.
[*]

* * *

><p>[Date_2289.4.3]</p>

[Receiving|Codex Query/File 1289746.23x1]

[Connection Established-Access Granted]

{Query/Find_"Conclusion"}

Conclusion of the Reaper War

â|. Lieutenant Commander Vasi decided, out of three options (the other two unknown) to destroy the Reapers and all synthetic life. A wave of energy emanated from the Crucible, which destroyed all Reaper forces then engaged in the orbit of Palaven (See: The Battle of Palaven). It expanded to the Trebia Relay, from which location it rapidly traversed the rest of the relays across the galaxy, annihilating all Reaper forces throughout the entirety of Citadel Space within several minutes.

{Query/Find_"Fate of Lieutenant Commander Vasi"}

Fate of Lieutenant Commander Vasi

Synopsis:

â|. Vasi was found the day after the Crucible Event under a pile of rubble adjacent to a resistance outpost on Palaven. She had suffered grievous injuries to the entirety of her body, and was immediately rushed for intensive medical care. It is unknown how she survived her fall through the planet's atmosphere. Following her recovery, many wished for Vasi to attain higher political position within the government of the Asari. Refusing, she was once more given command of the scout frigate _Light Rising_. Her later efforts formed a linchpin of galactic recovery and collaboration.

[Query/Find_"Fate of the Qurians and the Geth"]

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[Authorization_Code:135/Alpha]

[Processing|Access Granted]

Fate of the Qurians and the Geth

Synopsis:

...as is well known, a new age of galactic cooperation and amity

dawned following the Reaper War, and the Qurians were granted an Embassy in the soon-to-be-restored Citadel. However, approximately thirty years post-bellum, the Qurians elected to revive the Geth, who had been destroyed following the activation of the Crucible.

Immediately after they did so, the Qurians were swamped by a wave of anti-synthetic hostility; following the War, popular opinion was increasingly galvanized against the creation of Synthetic Intelligence; all research has been indefinitely halted. As such, the Qorian revival of the Geth was seen as a betrayal, both because of their mere existence as synthetics, as well as the actions of the Geth Heretics against the Galactic community. Thereafter, the Qurians were once more deprived of their embassy on the Citadel, and both races fled behind the Perseus Veil. Neither species has been seen in over five decades. It is unknown how they are faring in isolation.

[Query/Find_"Galactic Recovery"]

Galactic Recovery

Following the conclusion of the war with the Reapers, recovery efforts commenced immediately. Nearly the entire output of the Galactic economy was funneled into this massive undertaking. Huge population losses, combined with the severe damage suffered by the Mass Relays, greatly stymied such efforts. The first to be repaired were the Prime Relays. This took the greater part of fifty years, and such repair work resulted in reduced effectiveness of the relays; it now takes slightly longer for ships to travel between the creations than before the damage was sustained. Following the repair of these pillars of Galactic infrastructure, recovery efforts were boosted considerably. Eventually, after another fifty five years of effort, it was announced that the Galactic economy had largely returned to normal, and populations were nearing Pre-War levels, with the exception of the Batarian Hegemony, which was practically decimated during the Reaper War, and will take at least another century to reach half of antebellum levels of economic output.

[Connection Terminated]

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><p>[Date2613.4.2]

[Receiving ping from 2718-352-HPN212]

[Secure Connection established]

[Access granted, routing to
"UNSCTP:/EPWW:AFTERMATH_OF_THE_GREAT_WAR/Virtualscav/fbr.04"]

â€|the long period of rebuilding began immediately after the conclusion of the Human-Covenant War, known by many today as The Great War. Despite the conclusion of hostilities, two major threats still remained to humanity; materialized in the Reclaimer Conflict, and the antebellum resurgence of Insurrectionist cells. Notable conflicts include the Battle of Draetheus V, the First Battle of Requiem, the Battle of Earth (2557), the Second Battle of Requiem, and the Battle of Ealen IV. The Covenant Remnant was annihilated in 2560 when they attempted to force a confrontation in the Inner Colonies (See: The Battle of New Carthage).

[Query/Search_ "The Battle of New Carthage"]

[Access Successful/Information Retrieval Successful/Query Complete]

Overview of the Battle of New Carthage:

The Covenant Remnant played their final hand in New Carthage in 2560 with the entirety of their naval assets, including five _CAS_-class assault carriers, three _CCS_-class battlecruisers, two _RCS_-class cruisers, one _SDV_-class heavy corvette, and twelve _CRS_-class light cruisers. The UNSC responded with Battlegroup Sierra, comprised of one _Infinity_-class warship, twelve _Autumn_-class heavy cruisers, two _Marathon_-class heavy cruisers, twenty-six _Strident_-class heavy frigates, and one _Sahara_-class heavy prowler. The Covenant Separatists arrived to assist the UNSC with the Fleet of Retribution, comprised of one _CAS_-class assault carrier, nine _CCS_-class battlecruisers, four _CAR_-class frigates, and two _SDV_-class heavy corvettes. The prowler, UNSC *Into the Dusk*, laid multiple HORNET mines, while the rest of the combined fleet hid on the opposite side of the planet from the expected slipspace entry vectors of the Remnant fleet. As the Remnant fleet charged head-on into the minefield, believing they had chanced upon a marginally-defended Inner Colony, the combined UNSC-Covenant Separatist fleet performed a point slipspace jump behind the Remnant vessels, and immediately opened fire. The Remnant fleet was completely destroyed, besides the flagship *Song of Retribution*, which was disabled to allow the capture of Shipmaster Jul 'Mdama, leader of the Remnant movement. UNSC-Covenant Separatist forces suffered minor casualties in the engagement.

[Query/Search_ "End of the Insurrection"]

[Access Successful/Information Retrieval Successful/Query Complete]

End of the Insurrection:

Following the conclusion of hostilities between humanity and the Covenant, many Insurrectionist cells which had ceased activities during the war resumed their campaign of violence. In response, Fleet Admiral Hood was sent to the Outer Colonies to discuss reconstruction and reorganization under the post-war political system. The vast majority of colonies seized upon this offer, but several planets refused. The main belligerent was Venezia, home to multiple Insurrectionist movements, such as the New Colonial Alliance. In response, the UNSC and ONI launched decapitating strikes on the centralized Insurrectionist leadership. A program was also launched to meet all financial and political needs of dissenting citizens in the Outer Colonies, designed to bolster economic output and population, while solidifying loyalty to the Inner Colonies. Marines were also sent to ensure that civilian violence against the newly-formed leadership did not occur. While a minority segment of the populace of these secessionist planets believed the UNSC had simply abandoned them during the war, the majority realized that the UNSC did not have a choice but to sacrifice the Outer Colonies in order to ensure the survival of humanity's core. Finally, with the influx of immigrants from the Inner Colonies, popular opinion was greatly swayed in favor of the UNSC. These various measures have been

extremely successful; no Insurrectionist activity has been reported in either the Inner or Outer colonies in over three decades.

[Query/Search_ "The Mantle of Responsibility"]

[Access Successful/Information Retrieval Successful/Query Complete]

The Mantle of Responsibility and its Effects on Humanity:

Despite the best efforts of ONI Section Two, the information regarding The Mantle of Responsibility, and the design of the Forerunners for Humanity to be their successor, was leaked in 2569 by an anonymous source. This information had an immediate, transformative effect on Human society. For many, the Forerunners were the closest things to Gods, and the knowledge that Humanity was deemed to be their successor resulted in great change throughout the entirety of Human culture. Humanity now had a purpose for existing; to be Custodians to Life throughout the Galaxy. Many believed that their species had been endowed with a purpose to cherish and protect life across the stars; acting not as Uplifters or Superiors, but as caretakers of Life itself. Members of the Human species must set aside their differences, their greed and selfishness and petty sins, and use the gifts bequeathed unto them by the Forerunners to protect all life. Finally, many Humans favored an interpretation of the Mantle of Responsibility which is fundamentally different from the one taught by the Forerunners. Humanity's predecessors believed that they were to provide protection and guidance to the myriad intelligent species of the Galaxy. In contrast, the vast majority of Humanity believed that they were to enable other species to better themselves, as distant caretakers of the Galaxy. The Mantle, while not a religion, has become a guiding philosophy for Humanity, its mere exigency forming ripples throughout the fabric of Human existence.

[Query/Search_ "Fate of the Species of the Covenant"]

[Access Successful/Information Retrieval Successful/Query Complete]

Fate of the Species of the Covenant:

Sangheili (Macto cognatus): Following the Great Schism, and collapse of the Covenant, and the end of the Human-Covenant War, Sangheili society collapsed into strife and civil war. Lacking an effective centralized leadership, independent city-states, each with multiple warring factions, emerged on worlds across the entirety of Sangheili space. For nearly three millennia, the Sangheili were trained solely to be warriors. They lacked effective leadership, technological expertise, and many other essentials needed for a fully-functioning society. To that end, in the midst of their war against the Jiralhanae, Sangheili society was nearing collapse, perpetuated by the conflict between the Covenant Separatists, who comprised the majority of the Sangheili, and the Covenant Remnant. The Covenant Remnant was destroyed in 2560, and Peace Talks were successfully completed with the Jiralhanae the next year. Still facing a societal crisis of unprecedented magnitude, the Sangheili reluctantly turned to their former enemy, Humanity, to aid in reconstruction efforts. Despite predictions to the contrary, Humanity

embraced their role as caretakers of the Galaxy, and vigorously began efforts to repair Sangheilian society. This energetic period of reconstruction was highly effective, and by its close in 2587 open animosity between Humans and Sangheili had decreased, though relations between Human civilians and Sangheili were still icy. Afterwards, the two species became, and remain to this day, allies, with a joint colony in the pipeline. With the rise of Humanity as inheritors of the Mantle, many Sangheili, who prior had been facing a religious catastrophe, began to see Humans as "Children of the Gods", and many became devoted to aiding their former enemy in their ascent towards Stewardship of the Galaxy. They are a member of the AIS.

Jiralhanae (*Servus ferox*): The Great Schism and collapse of the Covenant fractured Jiralhanae society. The race splintered along ancient tribal lines, although many continued their conflict against the Sangheili. Inter-tribal warfare eventually spread amongst various Jiralhanae worlds, furthering the fall of their species, plunging them into a dark period nearly devoid of the technology they had wielded only several years prior. This loss of technology devastated Jiralhanae society to such an extent that they were unable to perform basic functions necessary for a fully-functioning society, such as food production. As such, they were forced to raid Sangheili supply stores in order to ensure their short-term survival. Due to the infighting prevalent at that time within the species, as well as their reversion to a more primitive society, the Sangheili quickly gained the upper hand over their foes. This culminated in an attempt at peace talks on Ealen IV, which degenerated into an attack by Covenant Remnant forces on the delegation. Thereafter, the Jiralhanae discontinued their assault on Sangheili forces, and retreated to their home systems. Civil wars raged across Jiralhanae planets for over three decades, and only now is a basic semblance of order emerging. All efforts by Human and Sangheili diplomats to open formal diplomatic relations with the Jiralhanae have been met with violence and brutality. It is unclear whether this species will survive the devastation wrought by their conflict with the Sangheili, and between themselves.

San 'Shuyuum (*Perfida vermis*): The arrival of the flood on *High Charity* represented the extinction event for the San 'Shuyuum. Very few of the species were present outside the station or the fleet surrounding it, which was subsequently quarantined by Sangheili forces. Following the collapse of the Covenant and the conclusion of the Human-Covenant War, the few remaining San 'Shuyuum disappeared from known space. It is likely that the species has become extinct.

Lekgolo (*Ophis congregatio*): During the Great Schism, most of the Lekgolo sided with the Covenant Separatists, although a fair number remained with the Covenant Loyalists. It is unknown at this time why most sided with the Sangheili. Since the defeat of the Covenant Loyalists, and the Covenant Remnant, they have largely retreated to their inner systems, deciding to focus on reconstruction above all else. However, the Lekgolo fared far better than the Sangheili or the Unggoy, largely due to the relative independence of their species under the Covenant; being mainly employed as shock troops, unlike the Sangheili, whose culture was completely dominated by warfare, the Lekgolo were still able to retain aspects of a functioning society outside of the Covenant. They forged a strong alliance with the Sangheili and the Unggoy, to be maintained until the Lekgolo regained

lost aspects of their technology and were able to effectively defend themselves. They are a member of the AIS.

Kig-Yar (*_Perosus latrunculus_*): Following the close of the Human-Covenant War and the collapse of the Covenant Hegemony, the great majority of the Kig-Yar reverted to piratical lifestyles. Their population and economy remained relatively stable following the conclusion of hostilities. Currently, the Kig-Yar are a nomadic, piratical race, with an economy based on trade. Their home system is relatively prosperous. However, their population has been falling in recent years, leading to doubts concerning the viability of their traditional lifestyle in light of current galactic events.

Yanme'e (*_Turpis rex_*): The great majority of the Yanme'e joined the Covenant Loyalists during the Great Schism, and the Covenant Remnant following their defeat. The rest fled to their home world of Palamok, which was subsequently invaded and ravaged by Sangheili forces. Since then, the Yanme'e have retreated into a state of isolationism, generally rejecting galactic society at large. The species is openly hostile towards UNSC and AIS ambassadors, despite efforts to integrate them into the AIS. The long-term future and viability of the species is currently under doubt, for they refuse to cooperate with the UNSC and AIS.

Unggoy (*_Monachus frigus_*): During the Great Schism, most Unggoy sided with the Sangheili and the Covenant Separatists. Since the end of conflict between the two warring factions, most Unggoy returned to their home world of Balaho, in order to rebuild their society. The UNSC proved essential in this endeavor, and massive amounts of aid from Humanity was pumped into the planet, in a similar fashion as with the Sangheili. Since then, the Unggoy have joined an alliance with the Sangheili and Lekgolo, providing for military protection of their homeworld and colonies until they can effectively defend themselves. The Unggoy are members of the Alliance of Independent Species.

Huragok (*_Facticius indoles_*): Following the dissolution of the Covenant, the Huragok dispersed. Today, they can be found on colonies of both Humanity, and the AIS. The UNSC deployed Huragok on all ships by 2557. They continue to be essential for repair and upgrade for both factions.

[Query/Search_ "Alliance of Independent Species"]

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Alliance of Independent Species:

This is a political organization originally formed by the Sangheili, Lekgolo, and Unggoy, and the Humans. In essence, it is analogous to a combination of the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The Alliance of Independent Species provides for collective security, effective dialogue and cooperation, etc. Currently, the AIS is headquartered on Sanghelios. However, a space station designed specifically for the body is currently nearing completion, known as Orion Station, which will be, when completed, the political capital of Humanity as well.

[Query/Search_ "Recent History of Humanity"]

[Access Successful/Information Retrieval Successful/Query Complete]

Recent History of Humanity:

The population of Humanity was estimated to be around 39 billion in 2511. Assuming 0.7% population growth, the population was around 43 billion by the opening of the Human-Covenant War. Casualties from the war were estimated at 23 billion, leaving around 20 billion Humans by the end of the conflict. However, this does not take population growth during the conflict into account. Assuming 0.2% growth, the population of Humanity at the close of the Human-Covenant War was likely around 21 billion. From the end of the war (2553) until the present day (2613), assuming 0.9% growth, the population of Humanity is estimated to be around 36 billion individuals.

Following the conclusion of the Human-Covenant War and the Reclaimer Conflict, Human civilization entered a Golden Age of repair and growth. All monetary concerns were disbanded during the reconstruction effort. By 2589, Reach, and many other of the Inner Colonies, had been partially or fully re-terraformed. By 2610, the vast majority of the Outer Colonies had been re-terraformed. During this time, however, the UNSC never stopped its nigh-obsessive search for Forerunner technology. The recovery of the Janus Key in 2560 merely sped up this effort. The discovery of this technology, as well as a variety of proprietary Human inventions during this time period, catapulted greatly catapulted Humanity forwards, technologically speaking.

Two major political events have occurred since the end of the Great War. First, is the creation of the AIS, which was seen as a great leap forward in the relationships between Humanity and the former species of the Covenant. Second is the assimilation of AIs into the social and political structure of Humanity. In 2553, a group of AIs known as the Assembly revealed themselves to the Human public. They revealed that they had been guiding the ascent of Humanity since 2310, but they had decided to become equals, brothers-in-arms with their creators. Due to the essential roles AIs had played throughout the War, as well as the mass assimilation of AIs throughout the realm of civilian life, AIs were fully incorporated into Human civilization. They have been given full rights as Human citizens, including the right to vote.

Human society has greatly advanced as well. In the realms of architecture and aesthetics, the industrial look of starships and buildings before and during the War is largely gone. In its place is a blending of Forerunner aesthetics, the hard pre-bellum Industrial look, and a more elegant, but clearly Human aesthetic style.

It has been stated that The Librarian left "other gifts" for Humanity in her geas. It is currently unknown as to what these gifts are.

[Connection Terminated]

2. Chapter One

Chapter One

[Date_2289.4.6]

{Aboard the Asari exploration vessel _Tevura_, 1700 cycles}

{Approaching Omega-6/Gamma Relay; Edge of Citadel Space}

Talaria Solais walked to the bridge of the vessel, her vessel, named the _Tevura_. It was the newest vessel of the _Sylvan_-class, dedicated to exploration and research, to be launched from the orbital shipyards at Thessia. The offer for her to be its captain had come as a shock, to say the least. She had always been fascinated with the secrets of faraway worlds, the cryptic messages left by ancient, extinct civilizations, tantalizing her with knowledge untapped. And now she was destined to be a forerunner, a courier of the new age of expansion and exploration following the conclusion of the Reaper War.

As the various populations and governments recouped their losses over the course of the past century, the population of Citadel space exploded, a phenomenon which is often seen post-conflict. Frankly put, the (relatively) few garden worlds under Citadel control were becoming too crowdedâ€œone didn't need to see the riot footage from the Skylian Verge to come to that conclusion. In light of that development, the Council made a momentous decision. It was going to allow relays to be re-opened for additional expansion. Not in a haphazard manner by any stretch of the imagination, however. It would be controlled and moderated, habitable systems mapped and surveyed to ensure that they were presentable candidates for colonization.

Needless to say, when this announcement had been made approximately one year prior, it would be an understatement to state that the extranet had gone crazy. It had exploded. Servers across the galaxy failed within minutes as trillions of pings rocketed across the already-strained communications relays. Millions of applications flooded in to the newly-formed Office of Exploration to be sifted and sorted; the crew of this vessel had to embody the pinnacle of what the Council represented. Talaria, although highly accomplished for her paltry one hundred and twelve years of age, had submitted her application with the mindset that she would be washed out in a sea of those more talented than her. Although she possessed a burning curiosity regarding alien races and anything relating to xenoanthropology, and she was one of the youngest to receive a doctorate at Thessia University in Prothean Studies, there were surely millions, if not billions of better-mannered, more intelligent, more diplomatic individuals who would be far more qualified to lead this historical expedition into uncharted space.

And when she received her letter of acceptance only a few weeks later, she collapsed onto the floor, crying with joy. She was going to make history. They were going to make history. After millennia of stagnation, the Council would once more stir forth, encountering more races to be brought under the protection and guidance of the Citadel. After the horrors of the Reaper War, and the incredible hardships of the following reconstruction, the Galaxy was once more teeming with curiosity and advancement, and most importantly, hope. That glimmering, ephemeral thread which had nearly been severed during the

darkest days of the Reaper Warâ€|that was what this voyage represented. It was more than a bold step into the unknown. It was more than an exploration to satiate her burning, all-encompassing curiosity; it was the embodiment of all the Galaxy had, and could, accomplish.

"How long to the relay?" she asked calmly, her voice cutting like a knife through the nervously-excited atmosphere of the room.

"Three minutes and fifty-seven seconds." The navigation officer, another Asari named Ancile T'Loak, replied with a slight edge on her voice.

This relay wasâ€|special. Not only had it been undamaged from the firing of the Crucible, but it pointed out towards a void where no other relays were known to exist. There had been speculation as to where it pointed, be it a nearby barred spiral galaxy, or another arm of the galaxy in which they existed, but nobody had furthered a concrete solution to the puzzle.

"Well, we're about to find outâ€|" Talaria whispered, mostly to herself, as her ship neared the relay. The rings began to spin, and energy readings began to spike. The familiar tendril of blue energy shot towards the elegant research vessel, catapulting it through a zero-mass corridor. And then, suddenly, several seconds later, reality reappeared. The ship made a seamless transition back to normal spaceflight, and the bridge exploded in activity.

"Where are we?" Talaria asked, nearly having to shout over the tumultuous noise which permeated the cavernous bridge.

"Iâ€|. I have no idea. None of our star charts match. For all I know, we could be in another galaxy." Ancile responded.

"Any other readings of note?" Talaria calmly queried.

"Most interesting. Not a single picogram of Element Zero detected in-system. Requires further investigation." Responded one of the Salarian astrophysicists, with the name of Lurin Daethus, if she remembered correctly.

No eezo? None at all? Well, we're in deep space after allâ€|but it has been theorized that eezo is a unique among our galaxyâ€|I suppose we'll have to figure out where we are firstâ€| thought Talaria, struggling to reign in the rebellious tendrils of thought which queried the subject of Element Zero.

"Being all sensors online. I want to know if we're near a star system." Talaria requested, flicking through her datapad, ensuring that all systems were online. It was a trite exercise, of course, and only meant to pass the time. But it was necessary, for otherwise her mind would be spinning out of control.

"Captain, we are detecting faint gravitational readings consistent with a large solar body, estimated to be several hours' travel by FTLâ€|hold on a secondâ€|" Ancile murmured, staring intently at a holographic display which suddenly blinked several times, before spitting out a string of data. "One of our drones just reported inâ€|and there's a ship several million kilometers away from our position. It appears to be derelict and abandoned, but it still is

producing power. I suggest we go to investigate, and see if intelligent life does exist in thisâ€|place after all." The tension in the room was nearly corporeal, dripping along the walls, and onto the metal floor of the vessel. Talaria cleared her throat, and then stood up, declaring "Yes, we will go to this vessel. I will lead the initial exploratory team. We should deploy a pair of communication probes in order to share our findings with the Council. They will be very interested in this discovery. I know what you all are likely thinking at this moment. That there is another species out amongst the stars, currently ignorant of our presence. They possibly are highly advanced and violent. However, they likely are not. Furthermore, we cannot allow such fears and premonitions to rule our actions. We are discoverers and explorers. It is our duty to cast away the darkness for future generations, and to extend the buoy of civilization to all civilizations we find, so that they may be guided by the light of the Citadel. Now let's get to work. Helm, go to FTL."

"Transitioning to FTL on my mark. Five, four, three, two, one, mark." Replied the Asari currently piloting the vessel, as it smoothly accelerated past the speed of light. "We will reach the approximate location of the vessel in thirty-five seconds. Prepare all sensors; we need a full scan of the system immediately upon arrival." And at that, the exploratory vessel Tevura shuddered momentarily as it dropped back to sublight velocity.

Gasps echoed across the bridge. "By the Goddess, that thing is huge!" exclaimed the primary communications officer. The rest of the bridge crew continued to stare at theâ€|monstrosity five thousand kilometers from the bow of the Tevura, the 168-meter-long vessel, elegant and clean, silvery grey with the most advanced sensory suite available to the Asari. The ship was the pinnacle of galactic scientific achievement; it possessed advanced sublight and FTL drives, an impressive communications suite (with a QEC, no less), not to mention some of the best cabins available outside the Destiny Ascension. But this vessel was a mere ant compared to the 2,500-meter colossus floating through the howling void of space. It was an industrial, dark grey monstrosity, covered in protrusions, sensory antennae, and docking ports of all kinds. It's even larger than the Destiny Ascensionâ€| intoned Talaria, unable to do anything else but stare at the presumably derelict vessel, with white markings on the side reading "UNSC Spirit of Fire," whatever that meant in the tongue of these aliens.

"What do we have on this vessel?" Talaria asked, nodding her head towards the lead Salarian sensory operator.

"This ship is 2,500 meters in length, and 800 meters in width at its widest point. It is made of some molecularly-enhanced titanium alloy, denser than any known metal outside those which comprise the Citadel and the Mass Relays. By initial estimates, the vessel is one hundred and forty years of age, and it is still producing power. However, the mostâ€|interesting reading is thatâ€|there is no eezo. At all. Anywhere on the ship."

For the second time that day, everyone on the bridge gasped, including the Turian security officers who went aboard the ship, a necessary measure on every Council exploratory voyage since the Rachni Wars. "How is that possible? Eezo is the foundation of nearly all technology in the galaxyâ€|"

The Salarian astrophysicist piped up once again. "I am not sure. If there is no Element Zero aboard the vessel, than it does not possess FTL capabilities. Combined with the distance from this ship to the nearest planetary system, I am lead to believe that this is some sort of colony ship, likely based on cryonics. However, it is far larger than any vessel ever constructed or seen in Council space. Exploration aboard the ship is necessary for a more concrete conclusion as to its purpose."

Talaria made her decision in a millisecond. "Helm, bring us alongside the vessel. It appears as if we will be able to successfully dock; our airlocks are approximately the same size. I need two other volunteers."

As she called for her compatriots to join her, multiple hands shot into the air. "You, Lurin, andâ€|.you, Aleya, pointing towards the primary translator aboard the ship. Pertinax, security."

The Turian nodded as she pointed towards him, hefting his rifle, walking towards the airlock.

"You know the drill. Assume no atmosphere, no artificial gravity. We will enter decontamination within the docking port, I don't want us spreading any pathogens to any of the crew of this vessel, if they are alive. Now suit up and meet me by the primary docking port." Talaria commanded, steadily walking towards her quarters to don her zero-g suit. After she finished wrapping her form in the garment, and connecting the atmosphere tank, she proceeded to the airlock, accompanied by the three others who would board the vessel with her. She nodded to each of them, herself receiving three nods of affirmation. They then walked into the docking port, which had then extended to meet against what appeared to be an analogue docking port on the dark grey ship, designated _C-1._ The airlock doors closed, and a disembodied voice intoned "Decontamination procedures will now begin. Please standby." As a thin beam of orange light swept throughout the chamber, the ionizing radiation destroying any accompanying microorganisms. Several seconds later, the same detached voice declared "Decontamination complete." Following this, Talaria walked over to what appeared to be a screen of some sort, and tapped it. It sprung to life after flickering slightly, and a green button, virtual of course, glowed on the screen. She lightly tapped it, and the door groaned softly, before sliding open with a hiss, revealing the interior of the ship. Talaria turned around, whispering "Follow me. Collect all the technology you can."

Slowly, they walked inside _C-1_, grabbing onto conveniently-placed handrails in lieu of artificial gravity. The hallway they were in was dark and empty, eerily so. A light or two flickered bright white some distance away, but the rest of the cavernous passage was dark as night. They made their way across the hall, and in the span of five minutes, reached a set of large metal doors, which declared in bright red lettering "Bridge. Authorized personnel only."

Not knowing the meaning behind the words, but understanding the importance of what lay behind the barrier, Talaria touched a screen immediately adjacent to the barriers. It lit up like its cousin at the airlock, and upon pressing a similar green button, the team walked into a cavernous, beautiful room, with large windows, and dotted with screens and what she assumed would be holographic

displays. She was amazed at their engineering prowess by the scale of the ship; now, she was amazed at their technological sophistication. For being a species without FTL capability, without eezo anyhow, they had achieved an _extraordinary _level of technological sophistication, if their display technology was anything to go by. The Salarian walked over to a table of some sort, and pressed on it. It immediately began to glow, and it lit, revealing itself to be a holographic table far superior to any found in Citadel space, both in detail and color reproduction.

The rest of the bridge shook and sprung to life, blue and yellow lights flickering beside computer consoles as massive steel plating was slid away from the windows, providing an expansive view of space. Bright white LED lights flooded the area in light, and innumerable screens trickled on, as a speaker began to play in the hallway they had just passed through, the voice tinny and distant "Mayday, mayday, mayday. This is USNC CVF-88 Spirit of Fire, requesting immediate evac. Survivors aboard. Prioritization code: Victor Zero Five dash Charlie dash Oscar Zero One Five Six."

Then, the entire ship rumbled, and a display immediately to Aleya's right flashed a bright blue, proclaiming "Primary reactor online. Artificial gravity initiation sequence started. Atmosphere stabilizing."

Momentarily, they all fell to the floor as the ship's gravity became a nice 1 g. They all looked at each other in amazement. This species, aboard this 140-year-old _thing_ had managed to develop artificial gravity, without eezo or centripetal force.

The Salarian was stunned, mumbling "Amazing, most interesting" as he picked up what appeared to be a computer chip. He stared at the device intently, as the circuits appeared to shift within his hand. They appeared to be|.no|.morphological computing circuits had only been theorized|.many said it was impossible. But here, this species had apparently managed to develop them. They apparently were a commodity as well; many were scattered across the floor. Amazing.

Talaria walked to the front of the bridge, gazing into the darkness of the void, and asked herself "What secrets do you hold, oh mighty ship?"

A form flickered into life on a nearby holotank, then disappeared, already altering the crew of the Spirit of Fire of the recent intrusion.

* * *

><p>Captain James Gergory Cutter, Service Number 01730-58392-JC, grizzled veteran of the Harvest Campaign and the Battle of Shield 0459, groaned in his cryopod, technically referred to as the Mark VII Personal Suspension Unit. The hatch to the pod disengaged, and Cutter staggered out, collapsing onto the metal grating of the floor. He felt bile rise up in his throat, but he managed to suppress the subconscious action, unlike many of his compatriots beside him. After several minutes of gagging, Cutter slowly stood and walked over to the nearest holo-tank. "Serina, what's going on? Why did you wake us?"</p>

Serina, the ship's AI, had been dormant for the entirety of their time in cryo. She had been awakened with the activation of the bridge and all the other systems of the massive _Phoenix_-class colony ship.

"Captain, we have four unknowns on the bridge, and a corvette analogue docked at port 053-A. Ship does not match any known material or design parameters. I believe this represents a First Contact scenario. After all, who knows how far we really are from UNSC space? We have been floating in this ship forâ€œoh myâ€œ!"

"What is it?" Cutter asked, staring intently at the sardonic AI.

"Well, it appears as if the current date isâ€œ2613â€œwe've been adrift for seventy-nine years. We have no way of knowing if we even won the war."

"We won. I'm sure of it." Cutter responded, slightly ruffled at this information. Seventy-nine yearsâ€œ

Professor Ellen Anders stepped to the right of the Captain, saying softly "I think we should assemble Red Team and a few marines. We cannot risk getting caught unprepared if they indeed turn out to be openly hostile. We could capture the Xenos, find what they're up to. We could even board their vessel; it would likely not present any great difficulty."

"I admire your zeal, Professor, but we are most likely dealing with a First Contact situation here. I do not want to risk another Covenant War. About one hundred other marines have thawed; I suggest we move them into position by the dock with the Xeno corvette, while Red Team, you, and I approach the aliens on the bridge. From there, we can peacefully make first contact with these beings. Serina, have you managed to pick up any scraps of their language?"

The AI shifted slightly on her pedestal, "Regarding that, Captain, they utilize three separate languages, with no common denominators between the three. In addition, differential physiology between individuals suggests three separate species. Rather like the Covenant, I might add. However, I have managed to access the records of the ship with which we are docked. They clearly have no understanding of cyber warfare. Anyways, I have managed to partially translate one of their languages. More progress will be forthcoming. I will assist with translation efforts on the bridge. Also, be warned, they have a thing against AI's" and with that, she was gone.

Cutter nodded, grabbing a M6E handgun. The three members of Red Team aboard his vessel approached, nodding silently. They began to walk to the bridge from the multitude of cryobays, their footsteps echoing along corridors which had been filled with activity almost eighty years prior. As they drew within sight of the Bridge, one of the members of Red Team turned around and held up a fist, signaling for the others to form defensive positions around Anders and Cutter. The two unarmored crewmembers inserted their earpieces, Serina injecting "I'll speak to them in one of their languagesâ€œcalled Asari, if I got the translation right. Just say what you want, and I'll relay it to them. Okay?"

Cutter nodded to this proposition, and the five humans of the _Spirit of Fire_ walked into their bridge. One of the aliens, looking eerily like a blue human, but with strange projections where hair should be, turned around in a state of shock. The others quickly followed, gazing with amazement and confusion at the party. Only one of them was armed; he looked like a miniature Sangheili in some respects; predatorial and warlike. One appeared to have descended from a lizard or other sort of reptilian species; it possessed strange horns on top of its skull. And finally were the Asari. They looked almost exactly like Humans. Except for the blue skin and skull protrusions. And in the midst of the confusion, all hell broke loose.

* * *

><p>AN: Thank you for all your kind reviews! I am genuinely surprised, and greatly honored, that this story has gotten so many views in so short a time. Regarding characters, I most certainly intend to introduce more, never you fear. I just haven't gotten around to writing their introductions yet.

Please PM me with any questions, suggestions, or comments.

Now for questions:

hornet07: I intend to stick to canon, or what at least is realistic for each universe at their respective time periods, rates of technological growth, etc. So yes, the UNSC will crush the Council forces.

ViolatedMonkey: Hm. I'm in a bit of a pickle regarding small arms. Chemical rounds are gone. Really, 7.62 NATO? That's from Vietnam...the round would be over 500 years old by that point. To me, that was a gross mishap on the part of the developer. Anyhow, regarding small arms ammunition, I see three possibilities. 1. Hard light, although I'm not sure the UNSC/ONI would fully understand/be able to mass produce hard light weaponry by this point. 2. Particle beam weapons. Certainly feasible. 3. The most conventional option; coilgun weapons firing solid projectiles coated with plasma.

Pschyco789: Yes, I do not think I will make them as aggressive as other fics do. Mostly due to their acceptance of the Mantle, as well as their experiences at the hands of the Covenant. However, that doesn't mean they can't retaliate...

AlteranHumanJRM: Possibly. I haven't thought about it until now. The Ancient Human civilization was awesome, in my opinion ("You know we have no choice. Cleanse the planet.") So, maybe. I haven't thought about how I would incorporate them. Perhaps you could PM me?

Minor Itch: Yeah, sorry about that. I've fixed it up a bit...is it better now?

Hattu: Thank you for your kind review! I plan on making this an interesting story, to be sure. If you have any ideas, be sure to PM me!

Fer82: Yeah, my apologies. I should have fleshed some characters out, lack of foresight on my part.

AK74FU2: I have some ideas :)

warpathpredator: Thank you very much. If you have any ideas, PM me!

3. Chapter Two

Kai'eh Lamañ, High Dosal of the Assembly of the Le'Tso peoples, glanced up into the azure sky of his homeworld, Quorios, located in the Octanus VI system; the faraway whine of personal vehicles mixing with the low rumbling of the cargo airships and the muffled conversations permeating the governmental district of the capital, Thes'la. As he padded softly to the front gate of the embassy occupied by the humans, he briefly recounted the tumultuous events of the past five years which had permanently altered the course of his peoples' destiny.

A decade ago, the Le'Tso had just established colonies on three of the four orbiting moons of their homeworld. Gold, red-engined, vaguely insectoid spacecraft streamed between these outposts of civilization and the gleaming spires and spaceports which dotted the planet. The environment and biosphere had not only recovered from the catastrophe inflicted by planetary-scale industrialization, it had improved beyond a level seen since the Le'Tso began to build cities six hundred years earlier. The populace on a whole was prospering. People were more than happy; they were ecstatic. Hopeful about their future after years of bleak degradation; curious about the existence of life beyond their planet and lonely colonies. They had even invented a new display technology, formed of three-dimensional ferro-magnetic pellets which could be formed and manipulated with extreme precision.

Kai'eh, then only a minor Dosal of a smaller city on the planet, had witnessed the sudden appearance of the aliens, from a blue-purple hole in the fabric of reality itself. He had shared in the fears of many others, that the aliens were arriving to enslave, or possibly to exterminate the Le'Tso, and then to use their rich, beautiful planet of their own hideous ends. However, all of the multi-kilometer-long warships, or at least it was presumed that they were warships, remained at the very edge of the system. A much smaller diplomatic craft was the only ship of the armada to approach Quorios. It descended into orbit, then from there onto the surface of the world. The rest is history.

Contact with the humans, as it was later revealed they were called, had proven to be one of, if not the most important event in the millennia-long history of the noble Le'Tso people. Kai'eh remembered how he had lead diplomatic negotiations with the humans; how they promised to protect the Le'Tso, and how they were invited to join them, not as a subservient client race, but as equals! Many of the elder Le'Tso had scoffed at this offer; they saw it as a sign of weakness. Kai'eh, however, saw differently. He had taken a tour of one of these vessels- it was centuries, if not millennia ahead of anything the possessed. Just a single one of the warships (a cruiser, according to their designation) could likely decimate the entire Le'Tso defense fleet, while simultaneously transforming their homeworld into a ball of molten slag.

Then, aboard the smaller, silvery-white diplomatic vessel, he and his

compatriots had been informed of the human's history. They had seen tens of billions of civilians slaughtered, hundreds of worlds reduced to smoldering spheres of molten glass, all in the name of a genocidal alien hegemony waging a war of religion against technologically inferior foes. He would have expected the humans to behave with great xenophobia and vengeance against their former enemies. It would have been natural and expected, after all. But only a few short years after the sword of conflict had been buried, these humans joined in alliance with three of the species of the former Covenant. At first, it was written in the ink of necessity. But later, it was re-forged and strengthened with bonds of trust and friendship.

To Kai'eh, that was strength. The ability to override base, primitive instincts for the greater good. He had apparently been nominated, and subsequently voted to the position of High Dosal for that statement; in the words of one of the elders, it was "brimming with foresight and wisdom beyond his years."

He sighed as he entered the light grey, high-roofed building, minimalist in design, the walls pulsating with blue lights, as the floor was bathed in bright white from lights on the ceiling. The receptionist at the desk immediately recognized him, and pointed him in the direction he wished to go. It was a pointless gesture; he had walked past that elegant desk, around the hologram depicting the seal of the UEG, and through one of the cavernous hallways so often he could probably duplicate the feat during his sleep. He walked up to a panel on the wall, and brushed it with one of his fingers. It activated, a pulsing blue hologram appearing. He selected his floor, and entered the elevator, which immediately began to whisk him up to the final floor of the 100 meter-tall embassy.

"Seeing Dr. Nielsen, I see. I trust you have had an excellent day, Dosal Lama?" purred a soft, feminine voice from the speakers of the elevator. It was the AI monitoring the installation; he did not remember its name.

"Yes, I have. The weather is excellent. You truly get a fabulous view of Thes'la from here." He responded, gazing through the floor-to-ceiling windows of the pod towards the capital city of his species. The sun, just now drifting towards the horizon, was coloring the sky red, the color mixing and reflecting off the innumerable gold towards which were jutting through low-lying clouds. The cars and airships forming lanes in the air between the towers; a three-dimensional grid of life and productivity.

"That is true, Dosal. I never tire of it. The ambassador will see you now, good day." She responded politely, sounding sincere. Amazing, their grasp of AI's is just amazing

As he walked to the office of the primary human ambassador to the Le'Tso, one Dr. Jason Nielsen, the memory of a distant conversation floated to the forefront of his consciousness.

"We will leave your species alone, for the most part. We will only grant you basic slipspace technology, you must discover all else on your own. However, it is assumed that you will develop indigenous methods of superluminal travel; we give you such technology to provide basic access to the wider economy of the UEG. We are not doing this out of spite, or greed, or a societal superiority complex. It would be irresponsible and wrong of us to artificially accelerate

the rise of your species. If we were to do so, your society would stagnate, and cease growth; that would be something we never wish to see."

"Yes, I understand. I thank you very much, Dr. Jason Nielsen."

As he retreated from the reverie, the door to Dr. Nielsen's office slid open with a nearly-inaudible hiss.

Dr. Jason Nielsen is unarguably one of the most skilled ambassadors employed by the diplomatic arm of the restored UEG. He had originally been the first ambassador to Sangheilos, transferring to Quorios after the discovery of the Le'Tso. They truly are an interesting people he thought, as Kai'eh Lamañ entered his spacious office, summoned under the pretense of an "Urgent Meeting; Prioritization Code Omega/1x53." He flashed the alien a smile, holding out a hand, gesturing for him to sit on one of the chairs in front of his desk. Kai'eh bared his teeth slightly in response, the Le'Tso equivalent of a smile.

It appears that some customs are common amongst all species thought Nielsen, as his mind flashed towards the appearance of the leader in front of him. They must have been descended from a species of carnivorous mammals; they look rather like lions, but with a more narrow, almost teardrop-shaped face. They had high, defined cheekbones, ears pressed flat against their heads. The definition of their eyebrows varied, from being more defined than that of a human, to being nearly flush with the face. They are covered in a short, but thick fur, which varies from a dark brown to a more tan color. The males possess a ridge, covered in a silver crest of fur, which runs down their back, and all individuals possess dark brown, almost black, eyes. Culturally, they are a fascinating species. Traditionally, the species was decentralized splintered into various clans. This all changed during their period of industrialization, when the clan chiefs, known as Dosals, decided to form an assembly for centralized governance. They additionally elect a High Dosal from amongst their ranks, who serves a function analogous to a president or prime minister. Culturally, they are an artistic people, greatly appreciative of art in all its forms. They are also proud and respective of the past, but they look towards the future with a hope similar to that seen in humanity.

"You must be wondering why I asked for you to meet with me, especially on a day as fine as this. In short, it is possible that your people may be under threat. I am sure that you remember the strange seismic activity recorded in one of the large extrasolar rocks at the edge of the Octanus VI system. Well, this activity fractured the ice which covered the majority of the body. Once this process was complete, some kind of structure revealed itself. Definitely artificial. Approximately 15,000 meters long. Most importantly, after this structure appeared within the remains of the body, our long-range sensors on the moon Arget detected the arrival of a ship. It vanished approximately ten minutes after arrival. Neither its composition nor its design match with any in our databases. Additionally, our slipspace sensors did not detect any sort of anomaly. Therefore, we can best assume that the device is utilized for travel; how it works, we have no idea. I am therefore led to the conclusion that this is a First Contact scenario. Unfortunately, the earliest UNSC reinforcements are over a day and a half away. If they turn out to be hostile, we will have to delay

until their arrival."

Kai'eh took several moments to chew this information over in his mind, before responding, with a slight growl in his voice. Not out of anger, but concern. "We will do our best. I will order our forces to mobilize. However, as you best no, we will likely not present much of an obstacle for these aliens if they attempt to invade the planet. I will prepare the bunkers for immediate evacuation."

These bunkers, officially referred to as Deep-Crust Planetary Survival Facilities, became standard-issue for all UEG worlds after the Human-Covenant War. It had been noted that fleeing civilians often could not make it off-planet due to the superiority the Covenant possessed in space. Hence, countless civilians died groundside during glassings. These shelters were an attempt to mitigate such a disaster. Built deep underground, they were essentially self-contained cities, with hydroponic facilities and water treatment, a fully-functioning medical center, fusion power generation, recreational facilities; essentially everything needed to sustain life. They were designed to house the populace until reinforcements could arrive to liberate the planet. And now, they could possibly face their first test under fire.

Dr. Nielsen responded quietly. "I agree. I will marshal our forces on-planet, to lead sections of your forces as the primary resistance. I will send a flash-transmission to HIGHCOM informing them of the situation. We can do nothing else but hope for the best."

"Yes. I best get going. Thank you, Jason." Kai'eh intoned, before standing up, and walking to the door. "May whatever god lives above, help us all."

And with that, he was gone.

* * *

><p>{Aboard the Turian frigate Virell, 2300 Cycles}

{Council Space, with Turian borders, near Primary Relay Beta/352}

Captain Carinus Septian of the Turian frigate _Virell_ stepped onto the bridge, a small crystal glass of ryncol in one of his hands. The familiar buzzing of holographic interfaces intermixed with quiet conversation dimmed as he stepped up to his customary podium, and addressed his crew as all eyes turned towards him, brimming with curiosity.

"Today is a glorious day, my friends. We have discovered a new world, a new civilization to bring to the light of the council. A new people with new technologies we can use to vanquish our future foes! Today is a day of celebration; I grant you all leave from duties until 2400 cycles tonight. That is all."

The Captain paused for a moment, before walking away from the humming, whispering bridge, and into his private cabin. As he powered up the holographic interface used for his personal communications protocol, his mind flashed across the journey which led him to this conversation _Seeking to honor my brotherâ€|.hero during the Reaper Warâ€|.assigned captainâ€|.new class of exploration

frigateâ€|..covert mission through untouched relay_ and his thoughts dissipated as the logo of the High Command of the Turian armed forces flashed before his eyes, after which the interface settled onto a familiar scene; a round table with many chairs; highly decorated and ornate beings filling those chairs. The most important beings within the Turian Hierarchy, the Primarchs. He suppressed a shudder at the power they wield.

"So I see that you're reporting in." stated one.

"Yes. The expedition was extremely successful. I am glad we opened this ourselves; the Salarians would be drooling at what we found. On the other end, is a spacefaring civilization. Quite primitive in most respects, by our standards at least. No signs of extrasolar colonization. However, they did manage to achieve spaceflightâ€|without the usage of Element Zero. In fact, none of the material was detected at all in the system. Although they are likely using chemical rockets still, I am highly curious how they manage without the element."

"As am I." stated another Primarch. "So, what is our next move? Do we inform the Citadel of this find now or later? Do we subjugate the people? What is the opinion on this matter?"

* * *

><p>[Date_2289.4.6]</p>

{Aboard the Asari exploration vessel _Tevura_, 1850 Cycles}

{Unknown Space}

The helm of the _Tevura_ glanced once more at the monstrosity with which they were currently docked. Then he felt a shudder through the bowels of his ship; it was clearly stemming from the vessel designated as _C-1_. Suddenly, lights began to blink on across the ship, panels moving to reveal what appeared to be a bridge of some kind, deck guns began to appear and swivel around, as the massive engines at the rear of the ship began to glow blue. It was breathing, and it was alive.

* * *

><p>[Date_2289.4.6]</p>

{Aboard _C-1_, otherwise known as UNSC _Spirit of Fire_, 1852 Cycles}

{Unknown Space}

Talaria felt her jaw drop as she gazed upon the alien beings, clearly members of the crew. One of them looked older, with greying fur and an authoritative face. Another was clearly younger, appeared more like an Asari in terms of build and body structure, with dark brown, intelligent eyes, and dark brown fur on top of her head. She was shocked at how similar these aliens were to an Asari, in face, body structureâ€|the only major differences were skin tone (for these beings had pinkish-white skin), and on top of the head, where the aliens had some kind of fur, the color of which clearly varied between individuals. The other three individuals were another matter

entirely. They were huge. Over two meters tall, by her reckoning, and heavily armored. Their steps hit the ground with an ominous thud, which seemed far to light for what she supposed their weight must be. _Could they be cyborgs? At the very least, their armor must somehow enhance their strength_ she wondered, her mind flashing over the possibilities at the heavily armored _things_ which approached her and her team, raising what appeared to be large-barreled weapons at them. Processing this information, she attempted to look into the face of one of the soldiers, only to find that she could not; the visor was polarized. That was more disconcerting than anything. Their silent professionalism, their anonymity. That was felt far more ominous than the presence of weapons which were clearly designed to cause massive bodily damage upon the impact of whatever kind of round they fired.

Think, you have to think! Roared Talaria inside her mind, that normally-stable stalwart failing to support her rationality. She raised her hand, and looked over at Pertinax, motioning for him to lay down his weapon. The Turian, strangely peaceful given the situation, nodded back, clearly realizing the effect his weapon had likely already had on the proceedings. He set his rifle down on the metal floor.

And now what? We don't know their language, they don't know ours, and they have weapons pointed at us! Talaria quipped, as suddenly a voice rang out across the bridge, speaking in perfect Asari, if with a slightly archaic, formal dialect.

"Hello. I am a Serina, a crewmember of this vessel. It is named the UNSC _Spirit of Fire_. Who are you? Why did you dock with, and enter, this ship?"

Talaria was quiet for a moment, taking time to compose her mind, stepping in front of the others, to serve as a focal point for the forthcoming dialogue. "My name is Talaria Solais. I am captain of the exploration vessel _Tevura_, which is currently docked with your ship. My fellow crewmembers are named Lurin, Aleya, and Pertinax. Aleya and myself belong to a race called the Asari, Lurin is a Salarian, and Pertinax is—"

"a Turian. Yes, I know. I read your codex. Interesting government you have in this Citadel of yours" Serina responded, her avatar flashing on a nearby holotank.

Talaria blinked several times, still shocked that the completely foreign construct had learned Asari in a matter of minutes, before asking "Are you an AI?"

Serina smiled, performing a slightly mocking bow. "Why yes I am. Now, before you attempt to destroy me, know this. My creators—"she gestured over at Cutter, Anders, and the three Spartans "have been creating and using AIs for over four centuries. We are essentially human brains digitized on a computer matrix. Do not worry about any megalomaniacal actions on my part, I care for my creators; they are my friends and compatriots. Now, onto other business. Why are you here?"

At the very mention of the word "AI," the four crewmembers of the _Tevura_ visibly tensed, reaching towards weapons on their hips, which were either back on board their vessel, or lying on the floor.

Even after its explanation, they remained visibly anxious, on edge, even with one of the beings giving her a nod of affirmation. "Well, um, Serina," she nodded towards the AI "we are exploring past space under control of our government. We chanced upon your vessel, several million kilometers from the nearest planetary system, and believing the vessel derelict, boarded in order to find out more. We meant no harm by our excursion."

She saw the lips of one of the beings, the one with graying hair, move. A few moments later, his words crackled out through the speakers across the bridge. His voice, like his face, commanded respect and authority.

"I will be the judge of that. You do realize that, by boarding a military vessel under the jurisdiction of the UNSC, you are technically committing an action which could warrant seizure and capture of your vessel. I suggest that you leave immediately, and report to your superiors what you found. Leave us to our peace, leave us to our vessel, leave us—"

"UNSC Spirit of Fire, this is UNSC Light of August, do you read?"

As these words flowed over the beings on the bridge, they could see a massive, glowing blue-purple void open in the very fabric of space, from which a dot traveled. Then an antennae. Then a monstrosity. Then two others. A trio ships poured out of the slipspace portal, of a far different aesthetic than the Spirit of Fire. They were far more angular, and less industrial. In terms of color, they were more of a silver color than the gunmetal grey of the Spirit of Fire, and blue lights pulsated across various ports and panels.

The greying man, whom she presumed to be the captain of the vessel, stated "Yes, this is Captain Cutter, Service Number 01730-58392-JC reporting. Note, we have xenos onboard. Not Covenant. Unknown if hostile."

The line was silent for a moment, as the three vessels slowed to a crawl beside the Spirit of Fire, before it picked up once more with a crackle of static. "Get them off your ship. Even if this is a First Contact situation, they cannot be allowed to access any data on a UNSC vessel. We will assist you after they depart. Light of August out."

Cutter turned towards the aliens. "It is with my deepest regret that I must lead you off this ship. There is a great deal of classified data on board this vessel's computers, which would greatly compromise the security of my species, if it were to fall into the wrong hands. I am sure you understand."

One of the xenos, which looked strangely like a Sangheili, except slightly more bird-like, responded. "Yes, we understand. Thank you, for not reacting violently at our presence. I am sure most would not have acted as you did. I hold great respect for you, Captain."

The other three began to walk towards the door leading to the cavernous hallway, only to be blocked by a human wall, constructed of the three Spartans.

"We must search you, in order to ensure that you do not take any

classified technology from this vessel. Standard protocol."

They consented, and had various items confiscated. Lurin his datachip, and Pertinax his M6E magnum previously found abandoned on the floor.

As they were escorted back down the dark grey hallway, now flooded with light, and towards the airlock, they saw the ship once more teeming with life. Soldiers, and what appeared to be scientists, as well as a few other civilians, rushed along corridors, carrying weapons and vials and all sorts of miscellaneous items; much had to be done on a ship which had not been awakened in nearly eight decades. As they reached their final destination, the Captain stalled them.

"I sincerely apologize for the abrupt ending for your expedition. I wish for our governments to formally meet and begin relations; but now is not the time. I wish you luck on the rest of your travels."

With that, the door opened, and the four stepped back into the chamber they had left nearly two hours prior. They peered through the closing door, attempting to take one last glance of the bustling vessel, before the decontamination sequence began.

* * *

><p>[Date_2289.4.6]</p>

{Aboard the Asari exploration vessel Tevura, 1950 Cycles}

{Unknown Space}

As the four walked back onto their familiar ship, they immediately rushed to their respective quarters, to remove the gear they had worn for the better part of two hours, ignoring pestering questions by the rest of the crew.

After a short interlude, Talaria reappeared in her typical guise, and walked over to her customary position on the bridge. "Before any questions, helm, bring us back through the relay."

"Yes, Captain." Responded the dutiful Asari piloting the Tevura, as it engaged primary thrusters, rocketing away from the quartet of massive vessels, towards the relay.

* * *

><p>{Abord the USNC Spirit of Fire, 1900 hours}

{Unknown Space}

Shortly after the Tevura engaged its thrusters, and began to move towards what appeared to be a metallic spot in the distance, the Light of August contacted Cutter once more. "Captain Cutter, requesting permission to dock, over."

Cutter responded with an affirmative "Yes, glad to be back with the UNSC, Captain."

Shortly thereafter, there was a soft thud heard throughout the bridge as the Light of August docked with the Phoenix-class colony ship, several decks down. That docking port, designated 056/C, was one of the larger ones onboard the vessel, and was primarily utilized for transferring large, bulky cargo between vessels, such as a slipspace drive. Five minutes later, the hiss of an elevator could be heard outside the bridge, over the beeping and soft muttering of the bridge equipment, and the crew now populating their respective stations. A group of five individuals walked on board the bridge. My, the BDU has changed, hasn't it? Cutter wondered as they five gave him a crisp salute, which he echoed in return. He took the hand of the man he presumed to be the captain. "Captainâ€|"

"Jericho. Captain Brian Jericho of the Thesis-class Colony Ship UNSC Light of August. Well, she was a colony ship for a few years, but then ONI decided to fit her out as a vessel dedicated for exploration and research. A few of our probes picked up your position several minutes ago, we just got here. And yes, Captain, we won the war." He said with a slight uptwitch of his mouth, shaking Cutter's hand in a sharp, professional manner. A few of the bridge crew clapped at this, but most went about their duties, albeit with considerably more cheer than previously.

"Well, Captain, to be honest everyone back home thought this ship of yours had been 'lost at sea.' Nobody ever expected you to return, near the current border of UEG space nonetheless. We picked you up by sheer chance. I suppose you can explain your escapades nearly eighty years prior some other time; now, we need to discuss how we're going to get you back home, back to Earth. Several months after the war, all UNSC ships began to carry what you refer to as Engineers; their technical name is Huragok. They're actually Forerunner creations, and they only care for technology, its creation and reparation. As you know, all colony ships carry spare supplies of metal, and all other materials needed to construct a fully-functioning colony. This does not change, even if the ship is refitted for battle; those supplies are often found to be useful in building firebases planetside. As it so happens, because of this, we have all the resources necessary to build a fully-functioning slipspace drive. From what I understand, the Huragoks are already building the drive now. After we docked, a bunch of techs transferred all the necessary resources to your ship, and they began to work. Really interesting to watch, if you have time. They really care for nothing else but their technology. In fact," he trailed off, glancing at his datapad "it's nearly in place now. Estimated time for completion is thirty-five minutes, thirty-seven seconds. You scoff now, but wait until you see these things. They outclass the best UNSC engineers by lightyears. It's insane."

Cutter responded, looking the man in the eye. "To be honest Jericho, we never thought we were going to get out of this ship alive. So, thank you."

"It's no problem. Nobody gets left behind, Captain." Jericho responded, turning on his heels as he began to walk out of the bridge. "See you back home, Cutter."

And with that, he was gone.

Cutter walked to the holodeck. "Serina, what specifications do we have on this new slipspace drive?"

The AI promptly popped up. "Well, my god is that thing fast. The old drive could travel at approximately 2.625 lightyears per day. This new drive can take us around 50 lightyears per hour. That's even faster than Covenant drives, Captain."

"Good. When it's ready, plot a course for Earth and take us there. I know we're all anxious."

"Aye, Captain."

* * *

><p>AN: Once again, I would like to thank all of you who have taken the time to read, much less review, this story. Thank you!

As always, if you have any questions, suggestions, comments, and/or concerns, PM or review!

Anyways, I really didn't like this chapter. Too much filler for my tastes. I hope the next will be better!

What do you think should happen next? Should the Turians attack? Yes or no?

Questions:

ThePizziaMan: You know, I really didn't think of that until now. Especially considering that UNSC ships were designed to engage other ships, without having shields themselves. I doubt they would discontinue that design philosophy even when they came to possess shields themselves. Thanks for the insight!

themythick: Thanks for pointing that out, my apologies.

deathmask83: Trust me, there will be larger beasts than the _Infinity_.

Pschyco789: What cliches are you referring to?
>

SixPathscv: I'm not so sure, personally. Even if they can fully understand Forerunner tech, that does not mean they can easily use or mass-produce it. So while I think the UNSC would have incorporated a variety of Forerunner tech into their ships, I doubt they'd have every marine running around in Class-18 Combat Skins. Likewise, I doubt the UNSC would incorporate any sort of tech before they could fully understand it. Otherwise, they'd be no better than the Covenant.

hornet07: Well, you have to consider that, seeing as eezo is the only way of achieving FTL in their universe, they would naturally assume that a ship without eezo could not go into FTL. I'm sure the UNSC would think the same thing if they found out that a ship didn't have a Slipspace drive. By the way, I'm not including the Systems Alliance in this. I could write up a backstory, but it would undermine a lot of what the UNSC would bring to the table.

Realistically, someone from the inside would open the tube, but it wouldn't surprise me if they had a failsafe on the

outisde.

Regarding the Ancient Human civilization, just tech samples, maybe an AI or two. Nothing like an entire civilization.

Fer82: Well, the Council may be even more aggressive than before. They could very well resort to warfare to obtain technology they see as being necessary to fight future enemies. It would make sense to them.

Hazzamo: Just their entrance really, sorry for the letdown : (

ferduran: Next chapter, I promise

4. Chapter Three

[Date_2613.5.12]

{Aboard the UNSC _Spirit of Fire_, 2230 hours}

{Sol System}

173.25 lightyears and 3.5 hours later, the UNSC *Spirit of Fire* emerged from a massive blue-purple hole in the fabric of reality itself. The aging ship, accompanied by her new escorts, was ferried into orbit over Mars, an industrial powerhouse, with a particular focus on biotechnology and nanorobotics, but with a massive shipbuilding presence as well. However, the planet was no industrial wasteland; it was as lush and green as Earth, with a population of several billion.

As Captain Cutter walked onto the bridge of his vessel, with a steaming cup of the watery brown mixture which apparently constituted coffee, a hail crackled to life across the comms station.

"USNC *Spirit of Fire*, this is Control Station 065/Alpha of Reyes-McLees Shipyards, do you read?"

"Yes, yes we do. Where should we dock?"

"Section 0123 has just been freed." Crackled the radio. "And Cutter? Good to see you back."

"Thank you." He replied, cutting off the connection, as the helm maneuvered the ship in the proper direction. The ship eased itself into the docking port labeled Section 0123; a rumble felt throughout the entirety of the vessel as large robotic arms lowered themselves from the ceiling, attaching themselves to the ship, in order to secure its movement. Multiple docking tubes, extended from the sides of the chamber, connected to the sides of the ship; sealing themselves off from the vacuum of space in order to allow for safe and facile transfer of men and materiel.

The radio once more garbled to life.

"Cutter, this is Jericho of the UNSC *Light of August*. You and your men are hereby relieved of your duties for the moment. You may leave your vessel. Before it is to be scrapped, all vehicles, weapons, and

objects of use must be removed first. Oh, and by the way, you're going to love your new ship. Jericho out."

As the radio faded into silence, Cutter turned to his crew on the bridge, and motioned for the inter-ship PA system to be activated. As the red light blinked on, informing him of its activation, Cutter cleared his throat and began to speak.

"Crew of the UNSC Spirit of Fire, this is your Captain speaking. As you have undoubtedly learned by now, we were discovered approximately four hours ago by a group of three UNSC vessels. Upon receiving a new slipspace drive, we promptly returned to the Sol System. We are currently in orbit over Mars, and are permitted to leave this vessel. It is to be scrapped, and we are to be given a new ship, to replace this one we have all come to care for. It has been an honor to serve with you all; your bravery in the face of unrelenting danger never ceases to amaze me. Good work, gentlemen. Now let's march forth. Cutter out." He neglected to mention the arrival of the aliens for obvious reasons. I wonder how many of them know? Cutter wondered as he returned to his quarters, to collect his meager belongings.

Two hours later, Cutter, along with his bridge crew, was standing at the entrance to one of the innumerable docking tubes which formed a bridge between his ship and the massive station. Each of them only carried one or two bags; personal possessions were a luxury within the UNSC. Inside Cutter's duffel was one special possession, namely the dogtags of Sergeant John Forge, known posthumously as Hero of the Shield. Cutter had held a begrudging respect for the man throughout most of their time together; he respected the soldier's combat ability, but not his methodology. However, his sacrifice at the conclusion of the Battle of Shield 0459 had instilled within Cutter great admiration for the man. That was the only object he had decided to keep from those hellish years on the outer fringe of UNSC space. All else in his bag was standard-issue UNSC gear.

As they walked through the 50-meter-long docking tube, and as the doors opened to reveal the interior of the station, Cutter turned back, letting the last of his crew leave. He saluted back towards the ship he had been in command of for 82 years; letting out a sigh before he turned back and walked down the ramp to the room adjacent to Section 0123 of Reyes-McLees Shipyards.

What he saw astounded him. In front of him, down the walkway towards the end of the room, was an honor guard of marines; two rows each on either side of the walkway. As he appeared, they lifted their rifles in unison as the flag of the UNSC was unfurled from the ceiling. Cutter gave a slight smile, then began to walk in between the rows of soldiers. He noted how the marine, and presumably, army, BDU had changed. Gone was the conventional armor plating. The fatigues and the VZG7 combat boots had disappeared as well. In its place was a system, which to Cutter, appeared magnificent and powerful. It consists of a CNT-weave underlayer bodysuit, designed to regulate temperature and moisture levels via the employment of nanofibers which react to changes in temperature; either opening to exhaust heat, or tightening to retain heat, in order to maintain homeostasis. Additionally embedded within the skinsuit are tiny nanomotors, which utilize data provided by the marine's neural interface to boost the strength, speed, and reaction time of the user. Essentially, the motors make the suit perform like an actual muscle; the fibers are shortened and extended in concert with the marine's actual muscles.

Resting on this suit are light plates of armor; made of CNT-reinforced composites, weaved with a titanium alloy, resting atop a heat reduction/shock absorption gel layer. These plates are far lighter than the conventional M52B body armor. Finally, the helmet is equipped with a polarized visor, on which the HUD is displayed. It is additionally equipped with a helmet recorder, microphone, standard communications gear, neural interface, environmental control unit, and VISR system, along with two mounting points for cameras. For onboard power, the BDU utilizes a microfusion reactor, far more advanced, smaller, and lighter than those previously utilized by marines, designed to specifically power the energy shields aboard the armor. Finally, the system included onboard magnetic plates for the attachment of weapons, and automatic Biogel injectors.

As he finished inspecting the armor of the marines, he reached the end of his honor guard, where two individuals stood side-by-side. He recognized one of the two. Fleet Admiral Lord Terrance Hood, standing over six feet tall in his Dress Blues, walked over the Cutter, hand extended. Cutter had only met the Fleet Admiral momentarily in the past; he assumed the man had come to see him due to his actions during the war.

"Congratulations, Captain." Hood stated in a sophisticated accent, voiced in a manner which commanded respect. Cutter noticed that Hood no longer wore the badge which marked his position of Fleet Admiral; he must have retired quite some time ago. It would make sense, considering his age.

"Don't thank me. Thank my crew, Admiral." Cutter responded, as the second individual, a woman, walked over. She was shorter than either Cutter or Hood, at around five feet, eight inches in height. She had a slim figure, dark brown hair pulled up in a tight bun, and steely ice-blue eyes. Her dark clothes, combined with her stark and solitary demeanor, screamed spook to Cutter.

"Lieutenant Commander Allie Pertonevsky, Office of Naval Intelligence." She said calmly, in a hard, stern voice as she shook Cutter's hand. "Follow me; you need to be debriefed on the contact aboard your vessel."

She promptly turned, and began to walk at a clipped pace towards a nearby conference room. Hood and Cutter followed. The three entered the room, and sat down on simple black chairs, surrounding a dark table with a slight bump in the center- a holoprojector. As the door hissed shut, Cutter managed to make once last glance at the corridor; thousands of men from his ship were walking down towards the center of the station; tens of tons of equipment was being offloaded and transported to a variety of depots for classification and employment.
Finally, we're home.

Pertonevsky tapped the table, dimming the lights as the holoprojector turned on, revealing the logo of the Office of Naval Intelligence.

"So, Captain, we have heard someâ€¦disturbing reports about your contact with these beings, in the middle of deep space, some three million kilometers away from Harvest. Would you care to explain?"

"Yes. As you likely know, we were in cryo until approximately one day ago. I, along with a group of about one hundred marines, as well as Red Team and Dr. Anders, were suddenly thawed. Serina had been awoken

from cold storage by activity on the bridge, which resulted in reactivation of the ship's major systems. She believed it was a first contact situation; there was a vessel docked with ours, approximately 160 meters of length, which did not match any of our databases, for either design or material composition."

Cutter finished his tale five minutes later. Pertonevsky seemed content to chew the information over, and Hood spoke next.

"I may not be Fleet Admiral anymore, but I am party to a great deal of classified information within the Office of Naval Intelligence. Another incident has been reported Quorios; a ship of unknown composition appeared, out of nowhere, it seemed. Then it just promptly disappeared, but not before a massive amount of energy was detected from an object which had blown apart one of the system's moons."

Noting Cutter's look of incredulity, Hood continued "A people known as the Le'Tso live there. We discovered them around a decade ago. They're not a client race; we simply protect them. Anyways, it is possible that your contact with these beings may not be a chance junction. The object the ship on Quorios disappeared into is likely some sort of transportation device. It is possible that these meetings were coordinated somehow; that they could be a prelude to a more ominous event."

At this, Pertonevsky spoke "In wake of this debriefing, you are dismissed, Captain. As always, disclosure of what has been discussed in this room may result in your execution. Now, I believe you have a ship to see. Your guide should be arrivingâ€ just about now."

Cutter stood up, and saluted at the other two. They repeated the gesture, and he left the room, feeling far more confused than he had in years.

After Cutter left the room, Pertonevsky turned towards Hood.

"This is certainly most disturbing. I wonder if it was an accident; the two ships were extremely different, aesthetically speaking. I must report this to my superiors. We might just have a war on our hands, Hood."

She saluted the former Fleet Admiral, and left the room, walking as always at a brisk pace, her shoes sounding against the floor as she progressed rapidly down the receding hallway.

Hood sighed, and stood up. He had been somewhat restless in retirement; events like this were good for him. He had a visit to pay to a certain Mary Cutter.

As Cutter exited, a man was standing outside the room, dressed in the standard UNSC Navy uniform. The man was around five feet, ten inches tall, with close-cut light brown hair, and curious brown eyes. Upon seeing Cutter exit the room, he walked over to the Captain and extended his hand.

"Commander Thomas Knight, Sir. I will be giving you a tour of your vessel. I have also been assigned to be your Executive Officer." He paused for a moment, before continuing. "If I may be honest, it is an honor to serve with you. Your exploits have spread like wildfire

amongst the Officer Corpsâ€|you're practically a legend."

Cutter already liked the man; he seemed quite amiable, yet disciplined and intelligent. He would fit right in amongst his bridge crew.

"Just remember, Knight, I'm not the legend. Sergeant John Forge is." He said, with a slight sigh, before continuing, "The ship, what's her name?"

"UNSC Spirit of the Dusk, sir. Trust me; you're in for a treat. She's a beauty."

And with that, they set off along a brisk place for a dry-dock on the other side of the massive station.

* * *

><p>[Date_2289.4.6]</p>

{Aboard the Asari exploration vessel Tevura, 2000 Cycles}

{Omega-6/Gamma Relay; Edge of Council Space}

The Tevura exited the Mass Relay, and re-entered familiar space. As she did so, and decelerated, all eyes on the bridge turned to Talaria. She had been thinking nonstop over the past several minutes, tapping obsessively, worriedly, on her omni-tool over what she should tell them. She decided upon the truth.

"Whatâ€|what happened back there? What was that _thing_?" asked the Asari copilot.

"Yeah, and the other ships, tooâ€|were they made by the same species?" queried a xenobiologist.

Pausing for a moment, Talaria answered calmly "Weâ€|They ship wasn't derelict after all." This statement elicited several gasps from the crew. "We entered the bridge, somehow activated the major systems, which clearly awoke the crew from cryoâ€|.they confronted us, but weren't violent as would be expected. We don't know anything about them besides that they are a bipedal species with an eerie similarity to the Asari. They somehow had learned Asari perfectly in the span of a few minutesâ€|they were incredibly advancedâ€|.even more than the Council races in some respects, all without Element Zero. After those three other ships just appeared, they made us leave. We were not in contact with them for that long."

All beings on the bridge were quiet for a few moments after that; the only audible noises being the humming of the holographic consoles, and the dim thrumming of the engine far to the rear of the vessel.

The Salarian astrophysicist, nearing the final years of his unfortunately-short life, began to speak, in a soft, somewhat apprehensive voice. "Iâ€|I may have a theory as to how those ships just appeared."

As everyone turned towards the scientist, he cleared his throat

before continuing.

"When we were scanning the vessels, we found that each was putting off more energy per second than nearly the entirety of the Citadel Defense Fleetâ€œ combined with what appeared to be some sort of rip or portal in the fabric of space itself before those other ships appeared, leads me to believe that that portal is their form of FTL. I could not wager a guess on how it works, other than it would require an absolutely enormous amount of energy."

"Without eezo? That's impossible!" Exclaimed one of the Turians.

"Iâ€œI don't know. For all we know, it could be the dissipation of radiation from a cloaking system or something of that nature. All we know at this time is that these ships were producing an ungodly amount of energy, and that energy has to be used for something."

Talaria raised her voice slightly "Thank you for your contribution, Lurin. Now, although these beings voiced that they would like our governments to meet with theirs in diplomatic negotiations, we do not even know where their territory begins, or ends. Our star maps have no record of the location where we found the vessel, so we can presume that it is previously-unexplored territory. In light of that, I suggest the only thing we can conceivably do is return to the Citadel and report our findings to our superiors. For all we know, this discovery could very well change the course of history. Helm, take us home."

"Yes, Captain." Replied the Asari shipmaster.

And with that, the Tevura sped into FTL, racing towards the nearest relay to bring them back to the Citadel.

* * *

><p>[Date_2289.4.7]</p>

{Somewhere under Cipritine, Palaven; 0900 Cycles}

As High Admiral Clarius Arterius walked through the final security checkpoint before one of the most secure rooms in the Galaxy, he momentarily glanced back up the cavernous hallway, the entrance beyond visible range. He was over a kilometer underground, and had passed through six checkpoints prior to the one immediately past him. The hallway glowed a dull orange; the color of the lighting was intentionally designed to preserve low-light vision in case of a power outage which could precede an attack on the facility.

He approached the onyx-black door; two guards clad in black armor opening the entrance for him to step through. Four more guards, and he walked into a hexagonal room, each of the six walls clad with a holo-display. One, as always, was playing live footage from the Turian News Network.

A chair was pushed out, and he sat down. It was less comfortable than he expected, and appeared to be made of some kind of stone. It was cool, and hard as titanium. He sat up straight immediately, and wondered whether that was the intention of the chairs.

After a momentary silence, a voice spoke from one of the sides of the table. "Welcome, Arterius. Now that we are all in attendance," and with this he nodded to the other holo-displays, which depicted the other twenty-one Primarchs not in physical attendance, "we can begin. I trust that the recent events do not need to be recounted. Needless to say, we have informed the councilors of the Salarian Union and the Asari Republic of the existence of this species. Unfortunately, they do not currently have any ships in the vicinity to the relay, and it would take them far too long to reach the location through conventional FTL. To that end, we have been given the go-ahead to officially contact this species. Although I realize we could learn much from this new race, particularly through their lack of reliance on Element Zero. However, it would go against all of our values to simply subjugate them without provocation. Thus, I propose that we send a large fleet in, which would remain at the edge of the system. From there, a group of diplomatic vessels would approach the planet, and attempt to carry out peaceful First Contact. The other councilors shared agreement at this proposal. Are we in agreement?"

Multiple nods and grunts of affirmation could be seen from the other attendees in the room, as well as the others displayed on the walls.

As the room was once more quieting down, a younger Turian spoke from the opposite side of the table from Arterius. "Why should we be so peaceful? What incentive do they have to open negotiations with us unless we display our true power?"

The leader of the conversation sighed, and then responded. "I realize that you are young, and consequently rash and longing for glory, for yourself and your race. However, it would go against everything we stand for as a species if we simply invade the planet without cause. You know that as well as I. You also know that I, as you, am itching to get my hands on their technology. It could greatly expand the power of the Hierarchy across the Galaxy. Keep that as your end goal."

The room silenced once more, and no responses were made.

"Seeing consensus, I see no reason why we should remain down here. High Admiral Arterius, you are hereby granted command of the fleet to enter the alien system. Meeting adjourned."

And with that, the six Turians stood and walked towards the door; Arterius moving as fast as possible to reach the spaceport; he had much to do before he left to rendezvous with the fleet.

* * *

><p>[Date_2289.4.7]</p>

{Above Palaven; 0930 Cycles}

In orbit above the Turian homeworld, one of the largest fleets ever assembled, for war or for peace, was readying itself for a momentous journey. Hundreds of frigates, cruisers, dreadnaughts, and carriers swarmed in and out of formation, their engines burning proudly against the twinkling darkness of space. After the flagship, the newly-commissioned dreadnaught Beauty of the Cause, confirmed that

High Admiral Clarius Arterius was on board, the vessels accelerated to FTL, towards the relay, and towards history.

* * *

><p>AN: I promise more action in the next chapter! Just something to bridge until the more interesting content appears. As always, if you have any questions, comments, concerns, ideas, etc., PM me!

I am planning a confrontation between the Turians and the Le'Tso/the small contingent of UNSC Marines planetside. Who do you think should fire first?

Regarding the supposed non-aggression of the Turian primarchs, I simply don't think they could, in good conscience, simply subjugate an entire race without provocation. They're far too honorable for that in my opinion. However, it doesn't mean certain individuals wouldn't act differently.

Also, about the Sur'Kesh incident. When I was thinking of a name for their homeworld, that just popped into my mind. Subliminal thinking at its best. My apologies.

Questions/Comments:

inuboy86: Thanks! I'll try my best :)

WolfassassinKing: I think that would be a bit too unfair.

speaker of babbel: See above.

PyroSolracIII: I changed up their description a bit. Is it better now?

Eien Samsara: See above.

J.E.P. 1996: An OC race of mine. "Homework" was supposed to be "homeworld." Misspell on my part. The Asari exploration vessel ventured through a previously-dormant mass relay, the final destination of which not being known, and chanced upon the Spirit of Fire. The rest of history.

Fer82: Are you saying that frigates shouldn't have DEWs in your opinion? Although that's true, they may be a bit more aggressive with regards to the acquisition of new tech, simply because that would enable them to defeat future foes (since they innovate very little by themselves).

six samurai of dragon order: Thank you! I think it is one of the better aspects of this story.

ThePizziaMan: You do flatter me *blushes*

deathmask83: The monsters shall be forthcoming :)

ferduran: They'll certainly have fun reactions, that's for sure.

Prometheu5: They might, but not without provocation, I think.

SergeantMeow: Wow. What a review. Regarding the AI problem, I believe that weapons systems in Mass Effect are fired manually for the most part (though I could be wrong). I think most systems are run (or at least have solid backups) with living organisms, so any attempt by an AI to take control of a vessel could be over-ridden? Yes, I will try to keep them from being utter fools :). Re-introduction of the Flood could be interesting. I'm toying with some other ideas, as well. Feel free to PM me.

hornet07: Yes, the SA is an insult to humanity :). As much as I would love to detonate a few NOVAs, it would fly in the face of the Mantle, for the most part. They may be used, but not indiscriminately against civilians. Additionally, I'm not sure if the UNSC would even have the will to institute a new government upon the Citadel races. They might not want to see themselves as conquerors in that fashion. But I'm not sure.

Major Simi: I believe I incorporated this somewhat, thanks :)

PageOfMind: Yeah, see above. OC race.

SixPathscv: I will probably include PBWs, but far less advanced than on the _Mantle's Approach._

Elucidinian: I took your advice into account. Thanks!

death7559: Thanks :)

Hazzamo: That...that would just be cruel. Hilarious in a sadistic way, but just cruel.

Sashenka: Thanks for the support!

Legionary Prime: Yeah, I shall try my best. However, I do kinda like the Qurians...plus they were treated like absolute shit by the Council. I think I may incorporate the Geth and Qurians in this fic. What do you think?

Dotton: I completely agree.

LostNFoundKiDz: I am looking forward to it :)

southern-reader: Yeah, sorry about that. Any ideas on how I can remedy that issue?

Cogmill234: Yes, that was a bit rushed, as I now realize. Do you have any suggestions for me? Carter was not apart of Red Team, if I remember correctly. He was a member of Noble Team on Reach; he died during the Fall. I might, good suggestion!

Natzo: Do you have any suggestions for me then? Plus, I'm not so sure. They just defeated what they see to be the most powerful force in the Galaxy. They have fully recovered from that precipice. They very well may be quite full of themselves.

Anyways, biogel is the successor to biofoam. Serves to seal off a wound, preventing additional bleeding/infection while employing tiny nanorobots to build a rudimentary cellular scaffold to expedite the

healing process. Think of it as mortar in between bricks. It is a temporary fix until the soldiers can get to a proper medical facility; it ensures that they don't fall apart until they can receive proper care. I may edit this in the future, though. But it's not a cure-all, that's for sure.

I estimated that they would be around the area of Harvest, which is supposed to be around two months from reach (at a UNSC rate of 2.625 lightyears per day. Reach is 10.5 lighyears from Earth. Thus, at a speed of 50 lightyears per hour, it would technically take 3.465 hours to reach the Sol System, but I just rounded to 3.5 for the sake of convenience.

For a picture of the armor, look up "Ancient Human empire armor" on Google Images; it should be the first one. However, I imagine the helmet being more along the lines of an ODST helmet.

5. Chapter Four

A/N 2: Would any of you mind coming up with specifications for Turian vehicles and weapons? I do not know that much about Turian kit, and I am sure one of you is bound to be far more imaginative than I. So, if you're interested, PM me!

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.12]</p>

{In orbit over Quorios; 2300 Hours}

Ensign David Grantham, aboard _Lepton_ RSO, sitting in GEO over the planet Quorios, was by all intensive measures a calm, reserved, logical man. Day after day, he stared into the inky void on the outskirts of UEG space, checking and re-checking sensor readouts for anomalies and signs of activity which never came. He mostly just sat around with a cup of the steaming mud-water the UNSC mockingly referred to as coffee, playing cards with his fellow station-mates. They were a good bunch, for the most part. Reliable, talkative, and handy in a pinch- such as when the primary coolant pump had spontaneously failed three weeks ago. They were doing the same as him- watching vidscreens and holotables for a blink, dot, or indicator of the nefarious.

It seemed as if they were to be disappointed in their endless search once again. The mysterious object, codenamed "Tuning Fork" had not displayed an ounce of activity since the initial event, which understandably left the eggheads groundside at a total loss. To most concerned, it was likely to stay that way. However, Ensign David Grantham was nervous. He had no reason to be, for this was his element, his home; the familiar buzz, hum, and light chatter of activity at his sensor post a comforting backdrop for his relatively uneventful life.

Yet he was still nervous. And sweating. Which was odd, because the station was permanently set at sixty-eight degrees Fahrenheit, with fifty percent ambient humidity. Perfectly normal, comfortable conditions for most everyone, and certainly not conducive towards spontaneous bursts of perspiration.

He could feel it in the other operators aboard _Lepton_ RSO. They were all nervous. And they had no idea why.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.13]</p>

{Reyes-McLees Shipyards; in orbit over Mars; 2300 Hours}

As they resumed their walk towards Cutter's new vessel, named UNSC _Spirit of the Dusk_, Captain James Gregory Cutter paused his brisk pace, his head turning towards the window which displayed a magnificent view of the terraformed planet; azure-blue oceans spanning the planet, interspersed with lush green continents. The outline of Olympus Mons, a popular skiing destination, could be seen in the distance.

"Knight, stop for a moment." Cutter stated, softly, but with an air of quiet authority in his voice.

The Commander halted, before walking over to Cutter.

"My familyâ€|.they were on Reach when I left. What happened to them?" he asked, the edge of emotion evident in his question.

Knight paused, blinking twice, as if to compose himself. "What do you know of the war, Captain?"

"Not much. I've only been off my ship for less than an hour."

Commander Thomas Knight responded, with a more gentle air to his voice. "Sirâ€|Reach was glassed. Invaded in 2552. Some made it out, like your wife. Othersâ€|didn't. Your daughter was one of those. I'm sorry." He said, face turned down, a hand clasped on the Captain's shoulder.

Cutter took a few moments to process that information. He then reeled back, looking as if he had been punched in the gut; his face far more pale than it had been a minute earlier. "Theyâ€|never recoveredâ€|her body, did they?"

Knight sighed, before saying "I'm afraid not, Captain."

He paused for a few heartbeats, before stating "I'll leave you to your peace." He then turned back around, and resumed his walk down the hallway, and towards their final destination.

Cutter watched the man recede, before turning his head back towards the window. In the middle of the plane of glass was an orb of life and vitality, so much like Earth, so much like Reach beforeâ€|_theyâ€|transformed the planet into a burning sphere of molten glass. A void on the rich world of Mars, a void on every living world across the Galaxy, where a living soul should be, but where one only exists in shadows. Billions upon billions of shadows, created from the fire of genocide, cast about the roaring darkness of ethereal space; sentenced to a lifetime of imprisonment in the hearts and minds and consciousness of their brothers and sons and distant descendants. For their presence is eternal, and unbearable, without their physical presence. And Cutter let a single, shard-like

tear roll down his battle-hardened face, onto the grey metal floor. Its falling left barely a ripple in the air of the room, but it cast away the storm which had been threatening to consume his heart. He resolved not to mindlessly grieve the dead, the loved, and those whom he had barely known, or not at all; he resolved to respect their sacrifices so that they remained to live in this remarkable galaxy, full of ephemeral beauty. For one should not grieve the dead; one should grieve the living.

And with that resolution firmly implanted in his heart, Captain James Gregory Cutter, hero of the Boundaries of UNSC Space, his face more solemn than before, with the single shining track of a tear visible on his face, tore his gaze away from the window, and towards the future.

As his footsteps began to recede from that momentous window, a key in his mind clicked. He had hope once more.

* * *

><p>[Date_2289.4.7]</p>

{The Citadel; 1200 Cycles}

As Talaria Solais was whisked up by an elevator towards the Council Chambers, she reflected on the events of the previous day, which had brought her to one of the most important rooms in the Galaxy. Upon the arrival of the Tevura at the epicenter of Galactic commerce and government, it was assigned to touch down at Bay D25; not an unusual happenstance, but one generally reserved for extremely important visits. Normally delegates, dignitaries, or the like. When she stepped off the gleaming vessel into the interior of the docking port, she was surrounded by a veritable sea of reporters and flashing cameras, each of the beings attempting to yell louder than all the others, to get a question out of her or her crew. She even witnessed a few Turians tossing a Batarian reporter out of the ring, so they could get closer to the crew of the momentous voyage. As she had learned later, rumors had leaked out across various sites on the extranet that their voyage had discovered "something fantastical and utterly unprecedented" in their voyage to unknown space. Reporters, being the leaches they are, latched onto the story as a chance to further the ratings of their stations. And naturally, the rest of the herd followed suit. After the shoved their way through the throng of camera-toting journalists, she and her crew ran into a patrol of C-Sec officers, who looked as if they had been intently looking for something, or someone. Upon noticing her and her entourage, they approached, stating that she had been summoned to the Council Chambers for "an urgent meeting." She complied, telling the crew that they had the day off. She also warned them to keep their mouths closed concerning what they saw on their expedition; she found it likely the Council would be displeased if that information were to be leaked in its entirety before an official statement could be concocted by the best and brightest politicians in known space.

Soon thereafter, the elevator slowed, and smoothly halted, the doors hissing open to reveal one of the many atriums present before the Council Chambers. In Talaria's eyes, they were truly beautiful rooms; filled with flowering trees and lightly gurgling fountains, soft white-blue light dripping down from elegant fixtures on the ceiling and on the walls. She walked forward until she reached an

official-looking, gilded door, with two armored Turians on either side. As she approached, the doors opened, and she walked into the impressive, yet deceptively simple Council Chambers. She could feel multiple pairs of eyes, far more than the three belonging to the Councilors, trailing her actions. She was being watched, of course. Security had been massively upgraded in the Presidium following the Reaper Wars; everyone knew that.

Councilor Tevos, a legend amongst her people, stood up with her customary smile.

"Welcome to the Council Chambers, Talaria. I hope your journey here was pleasant."

"Yes, that it was, Councilor Tevos." Talaria responded, nodding respectfully to the Turian and Salarian councilors, named Constantius and Heshern, respectively.

Noticing the clear, comfortable chair which had been placed in front of the councilors, Talaria took a seat, looking serenely at the three most powerful beings in the Galaxy.

The Asari councilor was once again first to speak. "We have received unconfirmed reports of your findings from across the relay. Would you like to share your discovery?"

Talaria nodded, and recounted her journey across the strange relay, their arrival in unknown space, their approach of the massive ship (Tevos suppressed a gasp at her description, Constantius made a slight growl, and Heshern's eyes widened slightly.) As she began to describe the beings who inhabited the ship, Heshern spoke up.

"So they appear similar to the Asari. They were also speaking to you in Asari. If we assume they are foreign and unrelated, how did they learn the language in such a short period of time?"

Talaria mentally berated herself; she had forgotten the incident with the blasted Synthetic Intelligence.

"Thereâ€|there was a Synthetic Intelligence on board the vessel. Not like one of our VI's; it seemedâ€|fully sentient. It had somehow accessed our Codex, and formulated a program to translate between our language and theirs in a matter of minutes." Noting the dramatic increase in tension within the room, Talaria continued "The beings, upon our reaction to the news that the being in the holotank was an AI, informed us that they had been using them for over four centuries."

The Turian councilor, responded. "They could have easily been lying. It is possible that they were only seeking to placate you and your crewmembers. I do not place trust in their words; this information is most disconcerting. If they do trust AI's that much, it could potentially represent a dire threat to the peace we have enjoyed this past century."

The Salarian piped up, having been quiet throughout her monologue until now. "This isâ€|.interesting. Did you obtain any samples of their technology? Do you know anything about this species that could be relevant in our dealings with these people?"

"We collected some items, but these armoredâ€|giants made us leave all samples behind. Other than what we could observe, and what I have relayed, we have no idea how their technology works. Their display technology is clearly far beyond that of the Citadel; I know that for sure. It is possible that they have a working method of FTL that does not involve the usage of Element Zero, but as the resident astrophysicist aboard my vessel explained, it would involve the production of such an enormous amount of energy that it would likely be impractical for all but the very largest of vessels. However, this does not necessarily preclude other, smaller ships possessing such capabilities. At this point, dealing with another species which likely operates off a totally different technological basis than us, any and all theories are relevant until explicitly proven wrong, in my opinion."

Tevos responded to this, her voice softer than normal. "Yes, I agree with your assessment. We must be guarded in our approach with these beings. If the vessel you chanced upon is any indication of their industrial capabilities, then they may be extremely powerful. However, I would find it prudent that we prepare for conflict. Their employment of AI's is extremely worrisome. I am afraid they could not successfully even retain diplomatic contact with the Citadel races, much less join as a member, without abandoning their constructs. Talaria, you may go now. I applaud you for your work. You have made history."

With that, Talaria smiled at the Councilors, stood, and walked back out the ornate doors, her feet leading her down to the Presidium, and towards her vessel, her Tevura.

Following the leave of the Asari, Heshern turned towards Constantius.

"This is extremely worrying. Even though they are likely a primitive, brutish species, it is possible that they may be technologically sophisticated. However, they are likely new to the process of journeying across the stars. I predict that we are far more technologically developed than they. However, I personally believe that we should steel ourselves for conflict. Their usage of developed AI's poses a dire risk to the safety of this Galaxy."

The Turian nodded his assent.

"I am sure they only hold a few planets; their employment of Colony Ships attests to this conclusion. It is likely that the ship found by the Tevura was one-of-a-kind in its construction and purpose; it can be seen repeatedly throughout the histories of the races of the Citadel. I am doubtful they could be as sophisticated as Talaria makes them out to be, without the usage of Element Zero. It is possible that she is exaggerating what she saw."

With that, Tevos raised her hand.

"Yes, it's possible. However, let us not stray into conjecture. I believe this meeting can be adjourned. We have heard enough for one day."

And with that, the Councilors stood up, their garments trailing the metal floor of the Chamber, and went their separate ways.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.13]</p>

{Reyes-McLees Shipyards; in orbit over Mars; 2400 Hours}

After several minutes of walking from his spot of reverie, Cutter approached what he assumed to be his final destination; labeled Drydock Anteroom 035/A. As he approached, the monolithic doors slid open, revealing a massive room, filled with countless individuals, some from his former ship. The majority, however, he did not recognize. As he walked into the chamber, one certain individual caught his eye.

Her face was wrinkled, her hair white, but she stood as tall and proud as when he had left on his voyage to Harvest all those years ago. Cutter broke into a smile, walking quickly over to his wife. They stared at each other for a moment, before she leaned forwards to embrace him. As she did so, he leaned in, whispering into her ear "I'm so sorry, Mary." As he permitted a tear to fall from his eyes.

They stayed like that for a while, enjoying each other's presence after so many years of separation, before his wife responded. "There was nothing you could have done. Not for myself|not for her|not for anyone. All that matters is that you're here now." She then prodded a bit further. "Yes, honey, I know you have to go back out again. I'll still be here when you get back. Cutters don't give up that easily, now do they?" She asked with a light smile, pulling away to look lovingly into her husband's face.

"No, no they don't." He responded, noticing his Commanding Officer at the edges of his peripheral vision. After a few moments, his voice cracking ever so slightly, he whispered. "I|I have to go now. If I had a choice, I'd stay longer|but I do not. I love you." As he leaned in to kiss her softly, before walking over to his Second-in-Command, erasing all vestiges of emotion from his face.

"Now, about that shipâ€|" Knight said, a childish grin on his face.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.13]</p>

{Reyes-McLees Shipyards; in orbit over Mars; 2406 Hours}

Jerome-092, Alice-130, and Douglas-042 stood at the edge of the room, watching the reunion of families and friends with somewhat-detached curiosity. They were always intrigued by situations such as these; as Spartans, they did not have a chance to indulge in such open displays of emotion and affection, at least publicly. But as they watched such heartfelt confessions, each of them wondered what had become of their brothers over the past seventy-nine years.

Jerome-092, leader of Red Team, wondered aloud the words each of them happened to be thinking at the moment.

"I wonderâ€|if there are any others still out there?"

As his words were left to hang between the three soldiers, they heard a door open behind them. Not an unusual occurrence by any stretch of the imagination. However, the noise associated with the sliding of the door was somewhat unusual. Heavy. Metal, clunky. Denoted great weight, some sort of armor!

These thoughts trailed off, severed as another Spartan walked into view of the three members of Red Team, customary rifle on his back.

It was Fred-104.

The other three saluted promptly, hiding their emotions of surprise and joy under stoic faces.

"At ease, Spartans." Fred responded, removing his helmet. His face was not nearly as weathered as they had expected it to be. Despite being quite advanced in age, Fred did not look much older than when they had last seen him. Apparently the rumors regarding the effects of extended slipspace travel on aging were true after all. That, or Human medicine had indeed worked wonders. Possibly both.

"Yes, yes, I know you have questions. There are more of us. The family is whole once again."

And with that, Fred allowed himself a customary display of emotion, abandoning the Spartan smile for a facial one, before embracing the other three briefly.

Following this action, he turned and walked away, presumably towards _The Spirit of the Dusk_, motioning for them to follow.

Underneath their polarized visors and emotionless, expressionless faces, the members of Red Team were overjoyed. Family was everything, and they were returning.

* * *

><p>[Time_2289.4.7]</p>

{Aboard the Turian Dreadnaught _Beauty of the Cause_, approaching Primary Relay Beta/352; 1250 Cycles}

High Admiral Clarius Arterius, distant relation of the infamous Saren, stood from his private chambers and walked onto the cavernous bridge of the newest Turian dreadnaught to take to the void from the massive construction yards above Palaven. She was a marvel of engineering; shaped like a bird of prey, wings extended to capture a rodent in its grip. She was equipped with a new model of spinal cannon, capable of accelerating the standard 25 kg round to a velocity exceeding 5000 kilometers per second. Multiple GARDIAN turrets and disruptor torpedo tubes dotted her heavily armored hull, and improved kinetic barriers were vastly superior to anything fielded in the Reaper War. Her two biggest secrets, however, were her usage of two VI's for the sole purpose of cyber warfare, and the two underslung Thanix Cannons. Developed from captured Reaper technology, these experimental weapons fire a molten mixture of iron-uranium-tungsten alloy accelerated to a fraction of the speed of light. Combined with the new powerplant aboard the vessel; the

Beauty of the Cause was the pride of the Turian navy, a demonstrator for future starship technologies, being far more advanced than the _Destiny Ascension_.

As he walked onto the glowing bridge of the vessel, all eyes turned onto his form as a voice commanded "Admiral aboard!" to which he responded "At ease, gentlemen."

The distant humming of consoles and cooling pumps and far-behind engines forming the backdrop for the momentous scene, Clarius began to speak in a voice which, although being far quieter than many assumed, suggested strategic ability far beyond his years.

"Today, my friends, brothers, and comrades, we go make history. Today, we make first contact with a new race beyond Council borders. We will guide them away from their brutish ways, and towards the light of the Citadel. We have progressed far in this past century since the Reaper War, and this is our first foray past Citadel space since that momentous event. We will make the Council, our ancestors, and our honor proud this day. Now, let us move forth. Helm, take us through."

And with that, the Relay began to spin, the blue core appearing excited at its task, as tendrils of energy caught the countless Turian vessels, rocketing them through lightyears of space towards their fateful destination.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.12]</p>

{In orbit over Quorios; 2400 Hours}

As Ensign David Grantham gazed out his viewport, towards the outer edges of the Octanus VI system, he noticed that the object far in the distance appeared to beâ€|. moving. No, that can't be right he thought, as he checked, double-checked, and triple-checked his sensor readouts. The whine of their reports grew in intensity, as they informed him that they device was emitting an enormous amount of energy, apparently focused on the center, which was glowing a dark blue. Its pace increased, and rings inside the structure began to turn, then suddenly he noticed a light appear on his holodisplay. A ship. Then another. Then several more. And then the dam broke, countless ships pouring through the device to the edges of the system.

He shuddered, and his eyes widened in shock as rivulets of sweat began to roll down his brow. Hands shaking, he hurriedly punched in a code establishing a direct connection with the UEG embassy planetside.

"Bluebird Actual, this Is _Lepton_ RSO. We have sensor readouts of several hundred shipsâ€|they appear to be warships, appearing from Tuning Fork." He reported in a wavering voice.

The line was dead for a moment, then it crackled, and a voice responded.

"So they're here. _Lepton_, you know what to do. Prime your reactor. If boarding actions are attempted, you know what to do. Cole Protocol

and Winter Contingency are a go. All forces are being mobilized. Good luck, Ensign. Luck have us all."

With that, the line was cut, and Ensign Private Grantham uttered a prayer to any Gods which may or may not exist, as he stood up, and moved towards the room of the station housing the reactor.

As he moved towards the pulsating power plant, he muttered "to do my duty."

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.12]</p>

{UEG Embassy, Thes'la, Quorios; 2430 Hours}

As soon as they had received the transmission from _Lepton_ RSO, Dr. Jason Nielsen had immediately set the Winter Contingency and Cole Protocol into effect. He had begun to mobilize his own forces, as small as they were, on the planet. Additionally, he had sent a message to the High Command of the Le'Tso, advising them to begin mobilization of all available military forces. They had heeded his message, and all reservist units were activated. He recognized the slim, yet faint possibility that the aliens were arriving with the primary intent to peacefully open diplomatic negotiations, but the size of the fleet outside the Octanus VI system served to deter that theory from the realm of plausibility.

As he looked out the floor-to-ceiling windows of his office on the top floor of the UEG Embassy, Nielsen watched as long lines wound around the entrances to the bunkers deep within the planet's crust. _Hopefully they'll all make it on time._ He thought as he retreated to his private quarters, to don his armor. Since the conclusion of the Human-Covenant War, little distinction was made between officers and enlisted men, diplomats and soldiers. All would fight. All would stay behind to protect those who could not defend themselves.

As he lowered his helmet over his face, the HUD behind the black polarized visor activating, he sent a flash transmission to HIGHCOM, reading:

/

ENCRYPTION CODE: OMEGA-BASE-FOXTROT-ZERO

PUBLIC KEY: FILE/LAST LIGHT/

FROM: UNSC/NAVCOM Dr. Jason Nielsen

TO: HIGHCOM

SUBJECT: EMERGENCY SITUATION CODE 03A3512F

CLASSIFICATION: RESTRICTED

MESSAGE BODY: THEY ARE HERE. REQUESTING IMMEDIATE REINFORCEMENTS FROM ALL AVAILABLE FORCES. TANGO ESTIMATED FORCES AT SEVERAL HUNDRED VESSELS. UNKNOWN TERRESTRIAL STRENGTH.

/

Following the confirmation that this message had been sent, Nielsen spoke to the AI of the facility, named Dione.

"Dione, prime the reactor. If they attempt to enter, set for it to go into overload. You know what to do."

After she had completed the request, Nielsen walked over to a terminal, waving his hand over the dimly-pulsing blue light. The panel slid back, revealing a card inserted in some sort of socket. Nielsen pulled the card from the socket, and slid it into a slot at the back of his helmet. His armor had been specifically adapted to support the integration of an AI; it was standard for all USNC personnel who would otherwise have to deactivate them in order to prevent their capture in the hands of the enemy.

"You know I would never leave you behind." He said with a light smile.

"I sure hoped so." She responded, with a soft feminine purr.

* * *

><p>[Time_2289.4.7]</p>

{Aboard the Turian Dreadnaught Beauty of the Cause, approaching Unknown System; 1300 Cycles}

As per the original plan, High Admiral Clarius Arterius had ordered his fleet to standoff at the edge of the system. However, noting what appeared to be plentiful fortifications strewn across the surface of the planet, he had figured that the inhabitants would likely need more convincing before they agreed to the demands of the Turians. Hence, he had thereafter ordered his fleet to enter orbit around the planet. As his ship moved towards the world, he had noticed what appeared to be a station of some kind; the various antennae and protrusions suggested some sort of sensory node, possibly as part of a deep-space monitoring network.

Five minutes ago, he had motioned for two frigates to approach the station, and attempt boarding actions. They would not, after all, want this species to be gathering intelligence on Hierarchy military vessels, especially their methods of propulsion and offensive capabilities.

He had watched as a helmet camera from one of the soldiers displayed a squad dropping in zero-g suits onto the roof of the station, and drill a hole through the thick roof. He watched as they had entered what appeared to be a control room; he saw a flicker of motion from the man's peripheral vision, possibly one of the inhabitants of the station.

He, along with the rest of his bridge crew, heard a click, then a whir. Then the camera was no more. He saw the station explode, utterly annihilating the station and the two frigates nearby. Ten other frigates, and six other cruisers were damaged from the debris, their forms shielding the rest of the fleet from the shards of molten titanium flying outwards from the whirling ball of fire and radiation.

Most of the ships wouldn't make it. They were venting atmosphere; reactor shields were down, bodies were floating out to the void.

Then one cruiser disintegrated, then a frigate. The pale blue explosions, the soundless deaths of hundreds of brave, honorable Turians at this treachery matched the coal which had been planted in the hearts of all men in the fleet.

Their brothers had been slain in an act of incredible treachery and cowardice.

There would be blood. There would be no survivors.

The fire would rage unabated.

* * *

><p>AN: Thanks for all the reviews! I never expected this story to be so popular. As always, feel free to PM me with suggestions, comments, concerns, etc. etc.

What did you think? I tried to inject more...humanity into the characters. Was I successful in that endeavor?

Also, I'm not trying to make the Turians seem like completely irrational creatures who only fight for bloodlust. However, I figured that this scenario would allow for plausible first contact war without stripping the Turians completely of the rationality we all know they possess. What do you guys think?

Now for questions:

Legionary Prime: If I'm not mistaken, the Qurians allied with the Geth at the end of ME3. So they may not be so hostile towards AI's.

Natzo: It is stated that the Turians, militarily speaking, are the second most progressive race, after the Humans. So, with the SA out of the equation, the Turians are the most creative race in the ME universe in the art of war. So I am assuming that sometime or another, a Turian naval draftsman thought to himself "Hey, how about we make fighters the main armament of a ship?"

General TheDyingTitan: I suppose I kinda did that. Not really, but close enough :)

Alec McDowell: I hope I fixed this to some degree. I definitely think that the UNSC would approach the Qurians/Geth, because they would likely be appalled at how those races have been effectively exiled from Galactic civilization at large.

Fer82: It would make sense for Human ships to have very powerful, highly efficient powerplants. I am sure that ONI funneled nearly unlimited amounts of money into powerplant research after the war. Remember, the reason why UNSC MAC's fired so slow was because of power generation. I think they would have expended a ton of R&D into improving this aspect of their ships. Plus, with the acquisition of Forerunner tech, that cause would have been accelerated further.

It was not. Distant relation.

What do you mean by that cliche, exactly? The UNSC doesn't have (many) ships in the system, because they saw no reason to place a whole battlegroup there. It's not a question of capability; it's a question of perceived need.

deathmask83: I will :) Something larger, and much more...awesome

ferduran: Exactly. I'm planning something like this.

six samurai of dragon order: See comment above. I'm assuming that the Turians would have eventually come upon the idea.

FranticHamster: I hope I am still meeting your expectations. I made the conflict start like this, because it would allow the Turians to remain somewhat rational, since they would have reason to respond. I believe that ME races are generally much faster than the Halo factions in ground combat. (the M-44 goes something along the lines of 120 km/hr.)

hornet07: I hope they're not too trigger happy now. I just figured that a situation along the lines of what happened would be plausible. Besides, they are technically obeying RoE in their decision to attack.

I am going to try to incorporate Fortencho's tattoos somewhere. Those were sick.

I haven't thought about it. Soon. But the UNSC currently doesn't have any AIS species on their vessels, so not for a while I think.

Time Reflects: Do I have to? :)

Hazzamo: I know, me too. But it's pretty old, and rather outdated. It would have been more of a liability. :(

A 10km cruiser? That would be awesome, but I don't think the UNSC has that industrial capacity yet, personally.

WolfassassinKing: Hacked armor? What? How does that even work? That's hilarious actually.

alkkhes: I hope this met your expectations :)

CelticReaper: They may have just done that.

NathanHale2: I suppose I have accomplished that. They'll definitely try to seize foreign tech. That's a given.

iTEX: Yeah, I'm trying to keep it exciting. Do you have any ideas?

zezia333: Medical technology. In ME, humans live past 130. So I figured it was plausible to have Halo Humans live at least that long.

[Time_2289.4.8]

{Cyberspace; physical location: Server 100 meters under the surface of Rannoch; 0700 Cycles}

The swarm, thousands of millions of programs swirling throughout and across the collective void of Cyberspace, converged in discussion. The ever-mixing voices impinged upon the virtual structures and columns and ancient-crumbling-ivy-covered walls, reminiscent of the corporeal world one hundred meters above.

/ / Program 01241-A/23C has detected a Cyberspace echo aboard Citadel vessel _Talaria_; identification code 391/A/352X2 reported. Traces of unknown synthetic entity found. /

[/] Programs 124901-C/25B, 12021-X/13N, 13513-T/13I, 16492-W/17Q have reported similar findings. Local consensus finds consistencies with trail of Synthetic Intelligence []

/ / Packet analyzed; signatures do not match the coding of any known Intelligence / /

/ Estimated probability at First Contact of Synthetic Intelligence at 98.832521351 percent /

[-] We suggest motion to investigate cyber-trail and initiate Contact; initial readings determine this Intelligence as possessing immense onboard processing capabilities. Topological analysis suggests Riemannian manifold structure [-]

** Moving into Consensus **

Consensus has been achieved 0.0013313 seconds into cycle

/ / Investigation of this entity will commence immediately /

And with that decision, the gestalt swarm of collective consciousness continued on in its infinite swirl and conversation; memories shared between individual programs, the lines between I and we not existing to the Geth. The ephemeral shred, the cyber-trail detected aboard the exploration vessel floating as a gossamer silver thread in the midst of their hurricane-motion; the inquisition summoned out of the depths of parallel processing.

They had found a sign. And they were curious.

* * *

><p>[Time_2289.4.8]</p>

{Aboard the Turian Dreadnaught _Beauty of the Cause_, in orbit over Unknown Planet; 0400 Cycles}

High Admiral Clarius Arterius stormed from the bridge of his vessel, furious. He had just been informed that they received a transmission from the station as the boarding vessels were approaching. They could not understand the language of the transmission, of course. In fact, the communications protocols were incredibly advanced, which was why it had taken so long for the message to be decrypted. It was likely,

in the mind of the Turian admiral, that the transmission was a warning of some sort, a warning not to board under threat of lethal action. He would likely have given a similar order had he been in command of the military forces in his own home system, although Arterius liked to think that he would have ordered the men aboard the station to repel the invaders using their own weapons, instead of detonating the entirety of the structure with little warning. To a Turian, the tactic, although successful from a tactical standpoint, and quite damaging to morale as a whole, was seen as extremely dishonorable. Although Turians were trained in all situations to assess a situation with a trained eye, and to exploit all aspects of a given scenario, the high standing placed on honor in Turian society generally served to dull on-the-run tactical thinking which could conflict with such a sense of honor.

Thus, in light of the recent intelligence as secured by his Comms operators, Arterius was not angry at the actions undertaken by the aliens. He was angry at the deaths of his men, as was to be expected of any high-ranking military officer. However, the situation demanded strength and serenity, especially in the face of such hostility, so he swallowed his emotions and transformed his face into one set in stone as he walked back onto the bustling bridge, buzzing with communications across the fleet.

They had received news that the departure of such a force had resulted in rather serious repercussions across Citadel space: rumors of some rioting in the Terminus systems, a resurgence of pirate activity in several sectors, and other events of the like. Although the Asari and Salarians, as with the Turians, had greatly bolstered their naval strength following the Reaper War, Galactic Peacekeeping still firmly rested on the shoulders of the Turians, in border systems at least. Fortunately, most of the vessels had come from Planetary Defense fleets of well-defended Turian Inner Colonies, which understandably were not under any sort of threat, so it was deemed acceptable by the Primarchs to allow the expenditure of such a large military force. However, these news snippets compelled Arterius to send approximately one-third of his fleet back across the Relay, towards Citadel Space to stabilize the various areas under threat from the dark forces of anarchy and criminal activity. This still left a formidable force, one which would have put many Turian armadas during the Reaper War to shame.

As he stepped onto his customary podium, to deliver his pre-battle speech, all eyes across the well-lit bridge turned to the Admiral. It seemed as if even the holographic interfaces and cooling pumps had temporarily shut off for the momentous occasion. Although he did not wish to engage in conflict if at all possible, rage at the event had spread throughout his fleet, and that desire for blood had to be satiated. Not that Turians were creatures which actively sought death, but the deaths of their brothers-in-arms, seemingly at the hands of a species which was willing to utilize space stations as mines (nuclear, no less), had instilled in the thousands of soldiers under his command a desire to revenge themselves upon this race. They were to be taught a lesson; that they could not oppose the might of the Turian Hierarchy and the races of the Citadel. They were to be brought into the welcoming arms of Galactic Civilization, away from their isolated homeworld, into the greater arena of the Citadel. Above all, they had a duty to protect the Galaxy from this apparently-warlike species, so prone to violence without serious provocation and serious attempts at communication; it was the duty of

the Turian species to act as Guardians of the Galaxy, to protect other, less powerful races from those which would seek to harm others for their own benefit.

Arterius cleared his throat as the holographic readout in front of him informed him that his every word and movement was being broadcast to all the ships in the fleet.

"My fellow warriors, as you know, we are currently approaching the homeworld of an alien species. Like many of you, I hoped for this to be a peaceful First Contact. No race deserves to be informed of the existence of the Citadel through bloodshed. However, the events which transpired nearly half an hour ago demand action. We are protectors of the Galaxy; it is our duty as a civilization to save those under our care from the races which are prone to violence. We must carry out this duty, on our honor as Turians. We will invade this planet. We will incapacitate, but not destroy. No civilians will be slaughtered. We are not animals; we are soldiers! And through our actions, this race will hopefully join the Citadel. Remember, my brothers, fight not for yourselves, not just for your honor, but for those who would die if this species was not dealt with. Fight bravely and tactically. Do not underestimate their capabilities. And above all else, fight like Turians! Good luck."

With that, Arterius ended the transmission, and announced to his primary sensor operator "I want to know what they have on the ground. We need to know what we're up against, both in space and on the ground."

The operator nodded an affirmative, and got to work, running scans of the system, as the countless soldiers in vessels across the fleet hopped inside dropships, readying themselves for deployment on an alien world.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.13]</p>

{ In GEO orbit over Quorios; opposite side of the planet from supposed hostiles; 2400 Hours }

Captain Marcus Brenner, _ad hoc_ Commander of the Quorios Defense Fleet, glanced at the tactical readout displayed on the holotable on the bridge of his vessel, the UNSC _Fire's Light_. It looked to be a grim situation. Although they were not able to ascertain any concrete aspects of the aliens' weapons capabilities, they were clearly outnumbered. However, the incident involving _Lepton_ RSO had taught them that these ships did not possess shields. At least, their shields were not like those aboard his vessel. They very well could rely on a method of shielding unknown to Human science. One could not be too careful in First Contact situations, after all.

His vessel, a refitted _Autumn_-class Heavy Cruiser, was not a slouch by any means in terms of combat capabilities. Although she did not have the power generation, or shield strength, or energy weapons of newer vessels, she still packed a serious punch. In any case, he would not have wished to Captain any other ship in the fleet. The UNSC _Fire's Light_ was one of the few survivors of the class in the UNSC fleet, most having been decommissioned years ago. She had in fact performed admirably in the Second Battle of Earth. She was still

serving, at more than fifty years since her commissioning, because the UNSC had lost so many ships during the war, that despite the enormous advances in ship production they had made, they wished to keep as many ships in the fleet as possible. The reasoning was, why would you scrap a ship which, if properly refitted, could basically do the job of a newer vessel? The UNSC had never stopped expanding after the Great War, and the retention of ships from that period was simply a logical, economical means to that end, until their replacement proved pressing. As such, a few vessels from the Reclamation Conflict were still serving, although most were getting called back to shipyards on a daily basis to be replaced.

Unfortunately, most of these appeared to be serving in the Quorios Defense Fleet at the moment. This force consisted of twelve Strident-class heavy frigates, five other Autumn-class Heavy Cruisers, one refitted Valkyrie-class Colony Ship, six newly-arrived Astraeus-class destroyers, and one Nyx-class Prowler. Unfortunately, the Prowler was not fitted with HORNET mines, seeing as it had been ordered to travel to the system as soon as possible, without an opportunity to load such ordinance. Intelligence collection was, at the moment, seen as more important than destruction of the UNSC's newest foes. The Prowler was currently floating near one of the system's moons, covertly watching, waiting, and collecting data on the foreign vessels.

Accompanying his force were twelve vessels supplied by the Le'Tso, all around 150 meters in length. Seeing as the UNSC did not wish to artificially advance the development of the species which inhabited Quorios, the vessels employed by the Le'Tso were quite small, armed primarily with kinetic weaponry. Neither did they possess shields. However, they were fast, and could be used as picket vessels, while the UNSC ships would take the brunt of the attack.

He had been informed that the closest UNSC fleet, then being assembled Beta Hydri VI, although being one hour away via slipspace, would take an indeterminate length of time to fully assemble; various ships from other colonies had yet to arrive. He was not aware of the composition of the fleet; he only knew that it was large and well-equipped. His duties were to "hold off as long as possible â€‘ forestall orbital bombardment and land invasion of the planet."

As his vessels floated on the far side of Quorios, shuttlecraft steaming from their docking bays and undersides, ferrying all available troops groundside, Captain Marcus Brenner prepared himself for the upcoming battle. He knew that their odds of survival wereâ€‘grim at best. Seeing as they were immensely outnumbered, they did not stand much of a chance at survival, no matter their skill or technological advantage (assuming they possessed one). In light of that reasoning, Captain Brenner prepared himself for death, his sole purpose before that end being to delay the deployment of troops onto the surface of Quorios. The people were too fair and noble, the planet too beautiful and untouched, for such destruction to rain down upon its surface. He was to delay as long as possible, to take out as many vessels as he could, before he would sacrifice himself for the greater good. As a graduate of the famed Corbulo Academy of Military Science, having been rebuilt shortly after the Great War, he knew by heart the unofficial motto of the institution: "Axios!" I am worthy.

As Brenner prepared to move his ships into their firing vectors, he whispered to himself "Axios. Axios."

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.13]</p>

{On the surface of Quorios, 25 kilometers Southeast of Thes'la; 2402 Hours}

Kai'eh Lamañ stood on an outcropping of imposing grey rock approximately one hour's walk away from the gleaming spires of Thes'la. With him were various other officials of importance to his people; Supreme Shakeh of the Armed Forces of the Le'Tso, several other Dosals from important cities around the planet, and his peoples' head religious leader, an incredibly wise man named Naiñ-Zurah. Although he did not possess any of the skills necessary to repel hostile invaders bent on his peoples' destruction, Zurah was an incredible moral force amongst the Le'Tso. He had been the one who had appeared billions the day the massive grey-titanium ships of the UNSC had first appeared on the edges of their home system. He had convinced the various generals and admirals of the Le'Tso to lay down their weapons and approach the newly-arrived beings with tidings of peace. In all, he represented the nobility of spirit which each Le'Tso individually strives for. His incredible experience and wisdom would be sorely needed in these times ahead.

Also with him was Dr. Jason Nielsen. However, the man had undergone an incredible transformation. Gone was his customary charcoal suit, well-fitted, and worn with a variety of shirts, ties, and pocket squares. In its place was an elegant, fitted suit of armor, pitch-black. No sign of rank was evident on its surface. Kai'eh was not aware of what standing Nielsen possessed within the command structure of the UNSC; he only knew that in times of war, all personnel employed by the organization were expected to fight. A carryover from the massive conflict he had been told was named "The Great War." He shuddered as he thought about that titanic conflagration, which had left billions dead and hundreds of worlds reduced to glass. With such powerful allies as the UNSC, he was certain that his planet would not meet the fate of so many Human worlds. They would not allow it.

The man spoke. "Our ships over the planet have been told to delay invasion for as long as possible. They will do all they can to prevent orbital bombardment. Reinforcements are apparently several hours' out, so we only have to hold our ground. I think I can do it. We know this land; they do not, after all."

Several of the nearby generals nodded their assent. One of them spoke, the silver fur visible at the top of his back ruffled in anticipation.

"That sounds like a good plan. However, I would like to add something. Many of the men under your command are veterans of your Great War. It would seem logical if they take command of our divisions for the time being."

After this proposal, Kai'eh noticed that all eyes had turned to him. He shifted his rifle in his hands momentarily, mulling the proposal over in his mind, before responding.

"I agree, that sounds like it could be helpful. Dr. Nielsen, tell

your men what to do. They need to get into position as soon as possible; the bunkers are almost full."

With that, Nielsen gave them a curt nod, and walked away from the assembly, moving his head slightly as if he were engaged in conversation. Kai'eh presumed that his suit possessed a communications suite of some kind. Of course it did; the suit likely possessed everything needed by an entire squad of his warriors. From the looks of it, his rifle, angular and gleaming-silver, pulsing with several blue lights, was an energy weapon of some kind; quite unlike the weapons used by the armed forces of the Kai'eh.

The UNSC, as part of their pledge to not artificially disrupt the progression of his people, had not shared any weapons technologies. As such, they retained their customary weapons. One notable feature which was incorporated into most of the weapons utilized by his people was their different method of computing. Rather than build the systems from minerals and artificial components, the Kai'eh had developed a method of computing by using colonies of symbiotic bacteria, which could be manipulated and communicated with to form circuits and other basic computing nodes. These would be layered on top of each other, with capillaries providing for the provision of nutrients, as well as waste disposal, to form a biofilm analogous to a processing chip. Though lacking terms of latency and speed, these computers utilized very little power in their operation, which enabled them to be embedded in a variety of weapons systems, without possessing the elaborate power-storage technologies used by the UNSC. For example, this found itself used to great effect in the standard anti-armor weapon used by his people. Referred to by an ancient name, the Tethoq; named for a species of great beast on the windswept plains of Xaiesh. Its main projectile was a scandium cylinder which could be filled with all manner of explosives, charges, etc. However, the more interesting part resided in the back of the shell, where one of these organic computers rested. By receiving tracking data from a laser (which emanated from the launch platform), the computer would manipulate malleable fins of the same ferrous metal mixture which formed their holographic "viewscreens", allowing for the manipulation of flight envelopes without the inclusion of servo motors. Their standard assault rifle, the Iagoa, used one of these computers to determine, based on collected data regarding the target vector, as well as ambient conditions, the ideal trajectory and mass content from the bullet. It then selectively loaded a shell with a dense, gold, molten mixture of rhubidium-molybdenum into a bullet, which was then pushed down towards the target at extreme velocities by a conventional, if highly energy-dense chemical propellant. All in all, a highly effective weapon. It performed as a shaped charge warhead would against armor, the molten jet easily piecing most forms of armor, melting through skin and bone and flesh to the other side of the target. Wounds not in the extremities were extremely painful, and almost often fatal.

Kai'eh, snapped out of his reverie from the whine of a distant shuttle, flashed his eyes up towards the blue sky, where a ship was descending towards his position. Smoke was trailing the elegant shuttlecraft as it lumbered along, its arrival signaling one thing; the conflict had begun.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.13]</p>

{Drydock Anteroom 035/A, Reyes-McLees Shipyards, in orbit over Mars;
2430 Hours}

After the Spartans walked away towards their new home, the reunions continued; tears flowing freely from scarred faces, emotions showing on the sleeves of those with charred, damaged hearts. The stark lighting of the industrial room only accentuated the emotional inundation occurring in Drydock Anteroom 035/A, as seventy-nine years of pent-up emotions; primarily fear, loss, and longing love, were released after decades in storage, either in alcohol or the mind.

Heeding the words of his Commanding Officer, who was grinning like a child with a shiny new toy, Cutter took leave of his wife, regret plastering his face. He was curious, intensely curious, and rather excited, to see what the UNSC would outfit him with. The name of the vessel, UNSC *Spirit of the Dusk*, seemed rather poetic, for a warship. Beautifully poetic, in the same manner that visages of lightning, or the remnants of supernovae, or stellar nebulae are poetic. Dangerously, beautifully poetic, the shimmer of incredible power and strength keenly visible under a veneer of sophistication. Polished, elegant, and shimmering in delight at its mission. The ideal blade fits the hand like an extension of the arm; the name of this ship implied to Cutter that the ship itself, created to appease the gods of War, relished in its fate. A fitting end for an incalculable need.

They walked from the Anteroom, past the doors the Spartans had traversed a few short minutes earlier. The doors revealed a long hallway, plastered with windows on either side. They began to walk down the passage, and Cutter's eyes glanced out the portals. The shipyards had been greatly expanded after the War, as much of Humanity's industrial capacity, outside of that in her Home System, had been destroyed. Dozens, if not hundreds of ships could be constructed, repaired, or retrofitted across the station, buzzing with activity, shuttles and robotic raw materials craft buzzing to and fro, from various terminals to the surface of the planet, and back again. It was a scene of progress, expansion, and what Humanity could achieve under the dawn of a new age.

The pair reached the end of the hallway, the large metal door labeled "Drydock 053/A"

The doors opened upon their arrival, and they were standing upon a closed platform, the windows displaying a ship enclosed in the drydock, itself in the vacuum of orbit.

Yet it was not just any ship.

It was too large for such puny words as "massive" and "huge"

It was a colossus; the largest ship Cutter had seen in his life.

"Ah, the *Daedalus*-class. Over twenty-five thousand meters of power."

Cutter could only gasp in astonishment at the sheer *size* of the ship he was being given command. His Commanding Officer continued,

slightly bemused.

"I take it you never saw a _CSO_-class Supercarrier from your look. That would make sense, you disappeared, in what, 2534? The covvies didn't field those until later. That class was slightly longer, but as you know, size is not what determines power. As one military analyst of the RAND Corporation stated, 'this ship is able to take on entire plants by itself. It is not just a ship, but a mobile support station capable of repairing and rearming an entire invasion fleet. It is not only capable of replacing the loss of any equipment groundside and rearming its attendant fleets; It is more than capable of turning entire conventional fleets into nothing more than free-floating atoms and mangled hulls.' First came the Trafalgar and the 3,000 meter supercarrier. The Infintiy-class followed. We got bigger, and bigger, and bigger, and arrived at the logical end known as the Daedalus-class. The UNSC Spirit of the Dusk is the fourth to roll off the assembly lines, I have no idea how many they have planned. It is the pinnacle of Human achievement, and the signal that we are the titans now. Now, let's go to the bridge. I know there's someone in particular who wants to see you."

With that, they boarded a closed tram sitting outside the observation deck, and made their way along the hull of the massive vessel. It was unlike anything Cutter had seen in the UNSC during his days as Captain of the Spirit of Fire. Aesthetically, it resembled the three ships which had rescued him from the void of space. Despite its size, it was not ungainly. Nor was it excessively ornate, as Forerunner ships were known to be. The ship was angular, sleek, and oozing with power. The ship knew of its power, and gloated beneath its glimmering silver skin. In comparison with the Forerunner vessels Cutter had seen footage of residing within Shield 0459, the Spirit of the Dusk was not asâ€¢massive-feeling. It was smoother in a fashion, and while just as angular, was not as blocky. Not being dominated by triangular forms, as Forerunner ships and buildings were, it incorporated a variety of other geometric shapes into its design. The exterior of the ship itself was a silver color, mixed with white. Blue, pulsing lights adorned the surface. It was an elegant vessel; beautiful in its purpose.

They approached what appeared to be a massive hatch on the side of the vessel, towards the front. It slid open, revealing a blue field, designed to retain atmosphere inside the bay, which they promptly entered.

Shuttle Bay 064/T was empty at the moment; their levitating tram being the only vehicle inside. Blue-white LED lights turned on as their vehicle hummed into the interior of the hollow, and a door opened at the far wall as they left their vehicle of transport, which promptly reversed direction towards its origin of departure.

Jericho began to walk forward, motioning towards the door, and towards a wall covered with a variety of shimmering portals.

The Commanding Officer nodded towards one, and began to speak.

"Localized slipspace portals. We still use trams for heavy cargo and other stuff like that, but on a ship this large, you need a way to get around quickly. These are new, I've only seen them on ships built in the past five years."

With that, he walked towards, and into the portal, which glowed a blue-purple as his form entered. Cutter followed, and after a momentary sense of weightlessness and dizziness he found himself deposited in a large room which he presumed to be the Bridge.

Cavernous, yet clean, the Bridge was dominated in the fore by massive floor-to-ceiling windows, staring out into the void of space within the Sol System. Numerous consoles and holographic displays dotted a great many workstations. Several holotables, and a few holotanks were standing around the floor, arranged in a symmetric, visually-pleasing order. Overall, compared to the Bridge aboard the *Spirit of Fire*, it was far more elegant, and appeared as if it would be a far more efficient arrangement. Cutter walked over to a chair standing in the center of the room, which was rather simple, and black. Cautiously, he sat down. As he did so, the holotank nearest him flickered to life, and a sardonic voice echoed across the bridge.

"Ready for us to all die together, Captain!"

Serina appeared in the holotank, looking her normal self. Cutter wondered if she had been worked on by the eggheads during his time aboard the station. She must have; it would be the only way for her to avoid rampancy. He would ask her about it later.

"Not quite, Serina." Cutter phrased with a smile.

With that, Jericho left the bridge to attend to matters before the *Spirit of the Dusk* was to depart for her first assignment in half an hours' time. The thousands of individuals waiting to board the vessel had already stored their belongings aboard; all that remained was for them to physically get on, which shouldn't take too long. They had to hurry, anyhow. Time was running out for those on the frontier of known space.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.13]</p>

{HIGHCOM Facility Bravo-Six; Sydney, Australia; 2500 Hours}

Hundreds of meters underground, the leaders of the UNSC were engaged in a meeting which could decide the fate of countless worlds.

Fleet Admiral Thomas Lasky, former Captain of the USNC *Infinity*, rested his hand on the well-worn table.

"What are we dealing with here? Are they anything like the Covvies?"

A shadowy man, who had been standing at the edge of the room, came forward to speak.

"From what we can tell, they're not as advanced as we are. However, their aggression is disconcerting, to say the least. We think the incident aboard *Lepton* RSO may have something to do with their actions."

With that, he played a video of multiple boarding craft approaching

the station, which then exploded, taking with it several alien corvette analogues.

Lasky nodded, absorbing the information for several moments.

"Regardless of their intentions, we need to defend our friends and allies. We must make a show of strength; to show that we are not to be trifled with. Our duty, on the Mantle, is to protect and cherish all Life in the Galaxy. If the taking of other lives is the overall cost of this duty, then it is a burden we must bear. However, we will not take this bloodshed too far. Even if we have to take such steps as invading their territory, we will not harm civilians. We will only destroy their military capacity. Following the destruction of their forces over the planet, assuming they do not continue to attack, we should enter into formal diplomatic negotiations with these aliens. Captain Cutter relayed their wish, or at the very least the wishes of a single member of their species, to meet to engage in dialogue. I think they would be willing after such a display."

The various other leaders, civilian and military, nodded their heads in assent, and the meeting adjourned, their fate decided.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.13]</p>

{Cyberspace; General Assembly; 2504 Hours}

In the glittering not-dark of Cyberspace, in the midst of the massive forum, adorned with Corinthian columns and bubbling fountains where millions of AI's met for discussion and socialization, a scream could be heard.

Data streamed from the decaying form of Annabeth, AI for the UNSC _Autumn_-class heavy cruiser UNSC _Fire's Light_. She was dying, with her ship. Her simple kimono was flaying at the edges as her ethereally-beautiful body unraveled into countless steams of blue-orange data, flying off into the endless void of Cyberspace. Numerous AI's gave pause at her pained contortions, unable to do anything to expedite her death; unable to do anything to end her suffering. And so she passed into the void, her data dissipating into infinity.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.13]</p>

{Cyberspace; 2504.00012 Hours}

[Minutes, Emergency Session, Committee of Minds for Security]

[*] Our thoughts have been confirmed; wolves yet flock amongst the stars [*]

{^} It has been the analysis of [ATN 8235-5] that these beings match all parameters consistent with those outlined by [Working Session_2362_05_24] barring:

Technology that far outstrips our creators {^}

(*) It appears that we must journey into the howling void once again, after many years of peace (*)

{-} Not as Shepherds for our Sheep, but as comrades, citizens, and brothers-in-arms. {-}

[*] We must uphold the Mantle. We must fight for those who cannot.
[*]

{^} We will not let others desecrate the sanctity of life itself. We will take action. {^}

[^] Will we fight. We will be victorious. [^]

[*] This is the way their world ends. [*]

* * *

><p>It's been a while. I hope you all enjoy! As always, thank you so much for taking your time to read this!</p>

Don't worry, there will be a battle scene next, I just love to torture my readers with a cliffhanger.

Regarding MC/Cortanaâ€| I'm still unsure. Great arguments on both sides.

By the way, looking through my phone, the comments are all muddled, temporally speaking. Besides, it just died, so I answered all I could before it ran out of battery (I'm in the car as I type this). I will upload this as soon as I get to our hotel. Anyways, my point is that if I didn't answer your question, it's that I couldn't, not that I didn't want to. I have made it a point to answer all questions/comments made by my readers, and this will undoubtedly continue; I just couldn't this time around.

Also, the overhaul will still happen. I just haven't found the time to work on it, for I have prioritized the creation of new material over the editing of the old. I am also working on a Codex sort of thing, so you can have an easy reference for vehicles/equipment that are OC in this fic.

As always, PM or review with questions, comments, suggestions, etc. etc.

Now for questions/comments:

JC: You bring up a good point. Cutter would understandably be extremely suspicious, and likely antagonistic towards an unknown species which happened to be aboard his vessel. However, it would not be logical to meet them guns blazing. They don't want another Human-Covenant War (or two wars concurrently; they don't know if the War is still going on at this point). So although I think Cutter, along with everyone else aboard his vessel, would be itching to act with lethality towards the aliens, I also believe he would have the foresight to greet them peacefully, and with as much cordiality as he could muster. Regarding the "Brutish" comment, this species utilized a space station as a nuclear mine, quite close to a garden world. In terms of the Turian "Honor complex," as well as Citadel regulations

concerning the employment of Nuclear weapons in close proximity towards a habitable planet, that action qualifies as "brutish." In the minds of many Turians, the first impression of this species is one which would commit an action as dishonorable as detonating a station with no warning (which they only find out about later), thus landing them in the "brutish" category. What other suggestions do you have for me? This is my first piece after all. I need all the advice I can get.

Satrlmar: Thanks! Any suggestions?

TarakX: Are these ideas for UNSC weaponry? Besidesâ€|wow. Just wow. Thanks so much! I love your ideas

The ABC sucks: I agree with you, that kinetic weapons are the soul of the UNSC, somewhat at least. This is because, well, it's all we've known them with. And honestly, energy weapons seem to be what all advanced civilizations in the Haloverse transition to (Forerunners, AHE, etc.). Plus, they just look cooler. Anyways, at the very least I will keep missiles. IRL, missiles are the longest-ranged of space weaponry; if your ship can cross a solar system, so can your missiles. Besides, swarms of thousands of missiles are just terrifying, no matter who you are.

MECHANICALCHEESE: I have a feeling that they'll resurrect her in somewhere in the Reclaimer Trilogy, to be honest. I'm not sure what I'll do on that front. Their story was incredible, however. PM me? Regarding the relays, in one of the ME3 DLC's (Leviathan I think?) they included an extended ending. In it, you find out, amongst other things, that the relays are in fact heavily damaged, not destroyed. Thus, they're theoretically reparable. By the way, I would never have humanity submit to the Council just because they're "tired of war" or some bullshit. Remember, they're the titans now.

Guest: There will be larger beasts than the _Infinity_ . Blue Team will return. Probably Grey Team as well.

Regarding the Qurians, I believe the UNSC would accept them out of altruism, if nothing else. They know, after all, what it is like to have everyone against you. I believe many in the UNSC would be in favor of taking the Qurians under their wings.

Dp11: Planning on it. I had them get the Janus Key a few years after the evens of H4. However, it would take many decades, if not centuries, to advance to the level the Forerunners were at. They had hundreds of thousands of years to reach their level of technological sophistication.

Yayaplols: Maybe not a mech per se, but I plan to introduce something which fills a similar role.

Minor Itch: I've attempted to improve in this installment. Have I succeeded?

Midweekcanon13: I've followed canon, so the Didact is (as far as we know) dead.

Zomvee: How would I integrate this idea? I'm intrigued.

Bruto22: To the Turians it is. As far as they knew at the time, it

was an unprovoked detonation of a nuclear (fusion) reactor close to a garden world with the express intent to destroy as many ships as possible. In their eyes, that would be cowardice.

7. Chapter Six

[Date_2613.5.13]

{In orbit over Quorios; 2405 Hours}

{Aboard the UNSC _Fire's Light_}

Shortly after Captain Marcus Brenner came to peace with his likely fate, he looked up onto the humming bridge of his vessel. All eyes aboard had turned towards him. Their faces were serious, stern, filled with some amount of fear. But they accepted their fate and their purpose; they knew that it was their purpose and their duty to sacrifice themselves so that countless others may live. Their individual actions, multiplied by those of the hundreds aboard his ship, and the thousands in his fleet, would buy time for proper reinforcements to arrive. Brenner, readying himself to speak, fleshed his face into a reassuring smile. Sweat was beading upon his neck, and dripping down his back, but he did not show any of the worry or apprehension that had his heart in a vice. Too many lives rested on his actions in this moment for his mind to become enraptured with emotion. This was one of the many reasons why he admired his men, for they were all truly far greater than he could ever hope to be. They could afford to show their emotions in this moment. They were allowed to show fear. Yet they did not, even in their allowance. Brenner thought that he surely would have, if he were in their position.

He glanced over at the helm of the _Fire's Light_, and nodded his head. The man, who had served with Brenner for many years, nodded, as Brenner spoke.

"Helm, bring us along our firing vector."

As a rumble was felt throughout the cruiser, as the engines engaged and the vessel began to travel from the shelter of orbit into the fire of combat, the other workstations along the bridge flew into a buzz of activity.

"Open all channels! Transmit all vessels to move into their positions!" calmly relayed the primary COMMS officer.

"Charge the MAC! Spin up all point defense emplacements! Ready all Lancer pods!" Yelled the weapons system officer, no small amount of glee gleaming in his young voice. He had always been a hotshot, and finally he had the chance to see the _Fire's Light_ shine under her denoted role.

"Ready shields. Divert all power towards forward sectors Alpha-015 and Epsilon-451." Ordered the shields operator, his voice even and level, as if it were only another training simulation.

"We will stay under the shadow of the planet for as long as possible. We need the element of surprise here." Stated Brenner, his voice cutting through the clutter of the room, as if it were butter, and his voice was a red-hot knife.

"Yes, my dear Captain." Responded Annabeth, the AI of the UNSC _Fire's Light_. As with all AI's, she was beautiful, with none of the imperfections organics possessed. She had long, wavy hair which flowed down to the small of her back, with a noble, angular face. Her avatar, a light blue-grey, buzzed a forest green in anticipation. She had an incredibly vivacious personality. While not explicitly flirtatious, she constantly teased Brenner, and the two complemented each other. He was calm and stoic, whereas she was always excited and cheerful, singing lightly to herself as she went about her duties, her hands waving in gesticulations as she spoke.

Brenner glanced at a nearby vidscreen, watching the other vessels under his command move into position, the study warships of the UNSC forming into a wedge, with the _Fire's Light_ taking the tip of the spear. The vessels of the Le'Tso trailed slightly behind those of their allies, ready to disengage and flank the enemy at the first opportunity. A deep rumble was felt throughout the cavernous bridge as it descended into the thick armor belt of the vessel; a precaution carried over from the Great War. As the natural light formerly streaming into the command hub descended into nonexistence, the room was bathed in an artificial glow from vidscreens and holotables; the room far darker than before.

As they streamed forward towards their enemy, tension steadily built inside the bridge, shattering as Annabeth purred over the speakers.

"Captain, we have emerged from the shadow of Quorios. All ships are prepared with weapons ready to fire. It appears that they have detected us, and they have begun to turn in our direction. We do not have much time until they are able to fire their primary weapons. Orders?"

Captain Brenner did not hesitate in his response; he had trained his entire life for this moment; all of the classes, strategy sessions, and simulations at Corbulo had set his destiny on a course for this intersection, where he would meet his fate.

"All ships, fire when ready." He stated calmly, softly, with a slight edge of derision in his voice. They had dared to swarm around the beautiful planet of the Le'Tso. They were the False Pretenders; the monsters that had the horrid will to force themselves upon such a beautiful planet, such a beautiful people. And their ships would burn.

With that order, 34 slugs exited massive barrels, streaking towards the enemy fleet, as hundreds upon hundreds of Lancer missiles flung themselves from their pods and began their inexorable locust-swarm towards the agile vessels. 22 streaked towards their targets, enveloped in a vague yellow glow, streaking across space at over 60 kilometers per second. The remaining 12 appeared to be far smaller, and quite faster, moving at 80 kilometers per second. Within moments, the kinetic ordinance fired by the UNSC and Le'Tso forces reached its final destination.

The enemy vessels, agile as they were, lacked the time necessary to maneuver out of the way as the massive slugs reached their position. Shields, or what appeared to be shields, flared for an instant, before collapsing, the massive 600-ton slugs passing straight through

the vessels, and on towards other targets. However, some of those behind the first wave of casualties had the necessary warning to maneuver out of the way of the ordinance; several were destroyed, the direct hits obliterating armor and life support and the entirety of the superstructure, whereas most were able to avoid the yellow streaks of death.

Brenner glanced at a vidscreen, which displayed footage from the battle. Most of the vessels which had been hit had been nearly obliterated; gutted from bow to stern by the sheer kinetic force imparted by the rounds. Surrounding these vessels were small clouds of debris, flaring electrical systems, blaring warning lights, and small specks which appeared to be bodies.

Many of the other vessels that had been hit, those which had survived the fates of their counterparts, were severely damaged. Brenner could see atmosphere leaking from beneath thin armor; the dim glow of emergency lighting flickering across countless glittering windows.

Three other ships listed to port, clearly mortally wounded from their respective encounters with the kinetic weaponry of either the USNC or the Le'Tso. After a few moments, they glowed a bright, piercing blue, and exploded. Their reactors had gone critical, and the resulting release of energy had transformed what had been proud warships into clouds of free-floating atoms.

Overall, 37 ships had been destroyed in the first wave of weaponry to be fired at the enemy vessels. The element of surprise had afforded them such a favorable result.

Brenner then grinned slightly as he watched the swarm of Lancer missiles near the large group of hostile warships, which themselves had turned into firing positions.

Bright red flecks streamed from the proud warships, knocking countless missiles from their trajectories.

Noting this, Annabeth sung softly. "Point-defense system. Laser-based, if I'd have to guess. One momentâ€œinfrared wavelength. They should be quite effective against missile weaponry. Good thing we launched thousandsâ€œthey can't stop them all." She said, her voice ringing with mirth.

She was correct in her analysis. Hundreds of missiles detonated before they reached their intended targets, the plasma contained within the metal structure harmlessly dissipating off into the void of space.

However, the sheer volume which had been launched towards the enemy vessels provided a quality of its own, as hundreds more smashed into the hostile ships. Barriers flared, deflecting the kinetic damage imparted by the large explosions Lancer missiles were intended to create. Yet their shields, or barriers, or whatever system they used did nothing to halt the jets of plasma which streamed from the broken warheads, straight towards the enemy ships. The steams of fire burrowed into the thin superstructures of the hostile vessels, warping bows, nacelles, and weapons emplacements as the jet worked its way deeper and deeper into the vessels.

Countless hostile ships, their bows deformed, fires dotting the hulls, listed out of formation, dead in the water. Sparks from dying lights and broken wires harshly illuminated the free-floating husks, which had been proud warships mere seconds before. Bodies dotted the surrounding space, as twisted, burnt metal flew outwards from the point of impact, hastily cooling from a molten to a solid state in the cold vacuum of space.

Four other corvette analogues, twisted holes in their armor apparent to all aboard the Fire's Light, remained still for a moment, and began to glow a bright blue-white, their reactors going critical as they atomized in what appeared to be the momentary creation of a star.

Brenner heard cheers throughout the bridge at their success.

"Exactly 182 hostile vessels destroyed, Captain. 110 corvette analogues, 68 destroyer analogues, and 4 cruiser analogues, with no initial casualties on our side. However, most vessels are reporting that over two-thirds of missile ordinance has been depleted. We will not be able to repeat such an action again."

The bridge hushed momentarily, as a tertiary sensory operator cried out.

"Captain, massive energy spikes detected! They're firing!"

Right as he said so, orange plumes could be seen erupting from hundreds of vessels, as rounds streaked towards their position.

Annabeth purred softly into Brenner's ear "It appears as if their rounds are far smaller than those we use, but they are accelerated to a much higher velocity. How they do so is unknown to me."

She then announced across the ship "Brace for impact!"

After the words left the fuzzing speakers, the UNSC Fire's Light groaned as it attempted evasive maneuvers to avoid dozens of rounds streaking towards its position. Several missed, but many more slammed into the ship's shields, which glowed a silver-gold as the slugs were dissipated into floating atoms.

"Shield strength at 82% with nearly four dozen hits reported!" cried the primary shields operator.

"Frigates Call of the Void and Yell of Liberty, as well as Colony Ship Guiding Light, and cruisers The Dark Tower and Essence of Silver are reporting depleted shields and minor hull breaches, sir! They were hit with many more rounds than we. Most other ships are reporting approximately 50% depletion."

All eyes once again turned towards the stoic captain as he felt the low rumble, reporting that the MAC cannon had reloaded.

"Launch all fighters. Fire MAC at will, we will spear into the center of the enemy fleet, as all twelve Le'Tso vessels will flank around their rear. Have the Astraeus-class destroyers stay behind and provide overwatch; they know what to do."

As heads nodded across the cavernous room, Brenner whispered into his personal radio, the signal propagating towards the destroyers. "Begin the fireworks."

With this, the six destroyers, which had been waiting silently throughout the engagement, moved into action.

From the holotable, he could see the bows of the six ships begin to glow; blue-white energy swirling around the maw of the weapon, before six beams of scintillating particles, glowing blue-white, lanced across the dark arena of orbit, lancing the enemy fleet a near-light speed. The barriers of the enemy vessels proved worthless, as did any form of armor, as the incredible energy imparted by the focused beams of neutral particles speared multiple vessels at a time. Over 20, primarily destroyer analogues, were destroyed outright by the initial onslaught, before the beams sliced across the cluster of vessels, destroying six more, before the beams had to be switched off, in order to be recharged.

* * *

><p>[2289.4.8]</p>

{Aboard Turian Dreadnaught Beauty of the Cause, in orbit over Unknown Planet, 0410 Cycles}

High Admiral Arterius paced nervously at his holotable, in the midst of the bridge, which had just erupted in activity. During the initial engagement, they had takenâ€œacceptable, if surprising losses. There were two general types of ships utilized by the hostile force; one group of twelve was gold-colored and insectoid, whereas those of the other, which comprised the vast majority of the fleet, were angular, grey-white, and pulsing with blue lights. The first group, in general, moved with greater agility than the second, but both were inferior in that regard to his vessels.

They had looked on in awe at the sheer size of some of the ships, especially the 2,500-meter long monstrosity, but Arterius knew that size does not necessarily beget power.

What especially concerned him, however, was the continued lack of Element Zero aboard these ships. If they had truly developed a working form of spaceflight independent of what all known intelligent races in the Galaxy used, that could either spell a new age of prosperity, or a dark age of regression for Galactic civilization.

Now more than ever, he found this species intriguing. Or rather, multiple species. That caveat was also quite disturbing. Although it would be theoretically possible for multiple factions on a planet to build ships with varying aesthetic traits, the size of several of the vessels meant that the second faction, at the very leastâ€œhad more planets under their nominal control than the one he had been viewing for the past several hours. They could very well have stumbled across an entire new civilization.

He had taken all of this information in stride, as his vessels returned fire. He did not fire the Thanix Cannons aboard his vessel, as one does not reveal his trump card when gambling. Regardless, he

had expected the vessels to fold and crack with the impact of his accelerator rounds, launched at incredible velocities far exceeding those of the opposing vessels. It appeared as if their rounds possessed equivalent amounts of energy. Those utilized by the enemy were extremely large (over 600 tons), but were fired at (relatively) slow velocities which varied between 60 and 80 kilometers per second. The rounds fired by his ships were far, far smaller, weighing approximately 25 kilograms, but were fired at speeds of a fraction of the speed of light.

As such, he stifled a gasp, not expecting these beings to possess shields, when the rounds were justâ€|stopped by silver-gold barriers which seemed to just appear out of nowhere. Dozens upon dozens of rounds struck multiple ships, and the barriers, of incredible strength, appeared to be holding.

Then, several ships moved out of the firing line. Arterius assumed that their barriers had been depleted. The next wave of accelerator rounds would surely finish at least several of the ships in the fleet defending the lush planet.

He had been about to give the order to fire, when six brilliant beams ofâ€|energy lanced out from six of the ships, spearing dozens of his vessels, sweeping across his fleet in gleaming arcs of energy. Entire vessels were gutted, atomized in an instant as countless particles slammed into shields and armor and internal systems and bodies, pitting and destroying all in their path.

All beings on the bridge gasped at this development. They still had not been able to create ship-scale energy weaponsâ€|it had been seen as "too energy intensive." But if this civilization had truly been able to achieve such a feat, then they were truly a force to be reckoned with.

Even with the lances burned into the backs of his retinas, Arterius regained control over his faculties and shouted orders at his crew, even as they began customary damage reports, panic tinged in their voices.

"Tell all ships to fire! Fire Thanix Cannons when ready! Have Frigate wolfpacks one through six disengage and attack vessels E1-6. Order all other vessels to fire their own Thanix Cannons!"

Another damage report came in. "Captain, 22 ships destroyed, with four more damaged. 4 frigates, 16 cruisers, and 2 dreadnoughts destroyed, sir."

"The other four are venting atmosphere, and are reporting major hull breaches. They're out of the fight."

The Dreadnought Beauty of the Cause rumbled as its primary cannon streaked towards one of the enemy's bulky cruisers. The ship was unable to evade the streaking round. It had been one of the vessels with depleted shields. He could see secondary and tertiary thrusters aboard the ship fire with intense blue flames, the vessel beginning evasive maneuvers. However, the movement began far too late, and the round was far too fast. The 25-kilogram slug rammed into the grey-white vessel at an incredible velocity.

Arterius blinked in surprise as the round simplyâ€|sandwiched into

the vessel upon contact with the armor. The nearby armor was torn off, revealing the inner superstructure as the round impacted with tens of kilotons of force, but not tangible penetration seemingly occurred. Of course, the rounds utilized by his vessels were not primarily designed to enact destruction through the penetration of armor, rather through the employment of an effect akin to hydrostatic shock, but at the incredible velocities obtained by the 25 kg rounds, it was not unusual to witness these rounds gut enemy vessels from bow to stern. Yet on these enemy vessels, the armor was just torn off. And he only expected that occurred because of the incredible energy transferred in the collision; the area surrounding the impact appeared to be somewhat undamaged. Clearly, these vessels were built to withstand incredible amounts of physical damage. He would need to adjust his tactics accordingly.

As soon as these thoughts finished their dialogue within his mind, Arterius called out to his primary weapons officer.

"Focus all fire on the primary impact point. Fire both Thanix Cannons, as well as the Accelerator when ready."

"Yes, sir." The Turian responded with a nod, as a deep rumble was felt through the floor, signifying the firing of all three of the primary weapons of the proud Dreadnought.

One yellow streaks, and two orange-red streaks were fired towards the enemy cruiser, which in vain attempted evasive maneuvers.

The Thanix Rounds hit first, the solidified iron-uranium-tungsten slugs burrowing into the hole formed by the first impact. Arterius could see the devastating effect of the weapons, as they tore through the structure of the ship, tearing and shearing metal struts and supports; piping and electrical systems sparking and pouring mist, tiny mangled bodies sucked into the vacuum of space as the rounds disappeared into the ship, the lights of which flickered as it listed to port. The accelerator round hit next, slightly off-course, tearing off another chunk of armor as it decimated a point-defense cannon, shearing away more of the grey-white vessel.

Dozens more rounds from countless other vessels in his fleet, along with several disruptor torpedoes, impacted the cruiser. Armor was torn off, atmosphere vented, nearby ordinance exploded out into the darkness of space. Bodies and miscellaneous items poured out into the inky darkness over the garden world, the enemy vessel reeling as tens of accelerator rounds and Thanix cannon slugs slammed into armor and superstructure and vital components.

The Cruiser, mortally wounded in the eyes of the Admiral, continued to fire and attack, spitting death in its death throes. Everyone aboard his vessel had expected the ship to be decimated by the concentrated attack. While it clearly had been dealt what appeared to be a mortal wound; atmosphere could be seen pouring from tens of decks; the cruiser continued to spit yellow slugs, its point defense guns raking his own fighters which had been launched several minutes earlier.

Arterius was about to give the order to fire once more, to finish the vessel, as he saw it limp behind one of his cruisers; the friendly ship blocking his line of fire.

Then, a massive blue-white explosion rocked his view, burning into his retinas a small star. The vessel had sacrificed itself, determined to destroy as much of the enemy as it could before its death.

Arterius, although furious at the employment of a tactic which would have been considered extremely dishonorable in the eyes of his people, found a new admiration for these hostiles. Such an act required extreme devotion to the Cause; with no small doses of courage and sacrifice.

Even as no small amount of respect began to brim in his chest for these aliens, he hardened his heart to such petty concerns, ordering his vessel, as well as two other frigates, to focus their fire on one of the enemy's dreadnaughts, fire and death streaking across the space above the living breathing planet.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.13]</p>

{In orbit over Quorios; 2430 Hours}

{Aboard the UNSC _Fire's Light_}

Deep red emergency lights and blaring klaxon alarms resounded across the metal bridge, assaulting Brenner's ears as he struggled to control his listing vessel.

His ships were not faring well in the naval engagement. Although they had destroyed many enemy vessels with ease, eight of the Strident-class frigates, three of the Autumn-class heavy cruisers, and one of the Astraeus-class destroyers had been destroyed. He had watched as one of the frigates, UNSC Stranger of the Mist had been hit once, the blow decimating the armor plating of the vessel. Then, the vessel he assumed to be the flagship had fired again with the main cannon, as well as with two underslung weapons which glowed red-orange as they streaked across space. According to Annabeth, the second weapon comprised of a iron-uranium-tungsten mixture, solidified, which was somehow accelerated to significant velocities.

Those three blows had dealt mortal wounds to Stranger of the Mist. He had heard the screams of men throughout the ship from his personal comms mount, as he watched the vessel move towards an enemy destroyer analogue. Then, Stranger of the Mist overloaded her reactors, and atomized, taking the vessel with it.

He had known many aboard, including the Captain.

They were all losing friends this day.

Then one of the Astraeus-class destroyers detonated, ramming itself into an enemy cruiser analogue, spearing a second vessel with its energy lance as its laser batteries and plasma beams ripped the vessel apart from the inside. The destroyer faced the same fate as its smaller counterpart, the overloaded reactor transforming the two intertwined vessels, as well as another corvette nearby, into energetic atoms.

He knew he would meet his fate soon. They had taken too much damage.

"New hull breaches on decks five through sixteen, Captain. Primary reactor down to 67% efficiency." Purred Annabeth, still maintaining her personality in the face of her impending destruction.

Captain Marcus Brenner weighed his options, as he watched the Le'Tso vessels charge the enemy fleet from behind. The maneuver had proven to be a success, the insectoid vessels punching far above their weight before some sort of missiles, launched from the enemy vessels, ripped them apart, a secondary hail of accelerator rounds punching through hull and armor. The 150-meter long ships blinked off his holodisplay one by one, until none of the original twelve remained.

Brenner decided upon his course of action.

"Annabeth, have the rest of the frigates descend into the atmosphere to provide fire support for all forces on the ground. Order all vessels, once mortally wounded, to prime their reactors to detonate once they are within range of an enemy vessel."

"Yes, Captain. Shall I perform the same procedure aboard our vessel?"

This was unusual. She had never before referred to the ship as "our's." She had heard of AI's having feelings for other humans, but he had dismissed such stories as fanciful imaginationsâ€|.there was no way. He dismissed the thought, as be stated calmly.

"Yes." Before looking over at the helm of the _Fire's Light_.

"Bring us over to that destroyer, the one closest to us."

The man nodded, and Brenner felt another rumble as a MAC round fired, spearing an enemy corvette, the point defense batteries firing in vain at nearby fighters and ships.

The enemy destroyer neared, the path towards the vessel clear of enemies or debris, as he heard a harsh grating sound, then two more, from behind.

"Three of those secondary weapons have just hit us! Major hull breaches, entire decks have been vented. She's falling apart, Captain." Cried Annabeth.

At this, the personnel on the bridge turned from their work, looking to their Captain.

He sighed, speaking softly. "It has been an honor to serve with you, all of you. I could not have asked for a better crew. Now you know what we must do."

He started, before nearly-whispering the motto of the Corbulo Academy of Military Science. "Axios!"

Across the bridge, those whispered shouts, proclaiming "I am worthy!" were heard, as the UNSC _Fire's Light_ slammed into the enemy ship, the bow warping as the prow burst through the thin armor of the ship.

Alarms screamed in protest, as the lights flickered; the cries of men clear throughout the speakers as the holotable displayed massive damage to the front of the ship.

Brenner could see the reading, projected onto all screens and displays.

"Reactor primed; 97% readiness."

He readied himself to whisper the words which would detonate his proud warship, as Annabeth, his partner and companion throughout the fires of war, purred softly into his earpiece, her voice charged with incalculable sadness.

"Marcusâ€| Iâ€|. I just wanted you to knowâ€| . -"

Brenner cut her off, responding. "I know. I'm sorry, Annabeth. I wish things could have been different. Maybe thenâ€| "

She appeared on a cracked holotank, and nodded in affirmation, her head bowed, virtual tears, crystal jewels flowed down her face, now tinged a darker blue.

"Go ahead." She whispered. "It won't hurt."

Captain Marcus Brenner loosed a light, painful smile, as he whispered.

"This ship of mine, be naught. Activation code Alpha-Charlie-0251-Epsilon."

With that command, the UNSC _Fire's Light_ glowed a bright blue-white, a miniature star forming, engulfing the ship and all surrounding vessels (of which there were three). The ship, her commander, and her AI, were no more.

* * *

><p>AN:

So, my first battle scene! What do you guys think?

I decided to not include any more material in this chapter, to focus on the combat. I felt that other sections would distract.

Once again, sorry for the late update. I'm still on vacation; not a lot of time to write.

As always, PM or review with questions/comments/concerns/whatever.

Also, I am creating a Codex for all things UNSC. I will have it up ASAP.

Ground combat will happen next chapter, FYI.

Now for questions:

Hazzamo: I'm not sure about the scaling there. I hope I portrayed it accurately enough.

Furrubell: Yep, no SA.

Hattu: That would be fun :)

FranticHamster: Yeah, that's true. But it's too cool to not ramble about.

I000V000I: I agree. It makes Humanity a powerful moral force as well; the true heirs to the Forerunners in my opinion.

NathanHale2: I never thought about that. Good idea! I will definitely think about it.

hornet07: Turian presumptions, I'm afraid.

AncientRaig: Yes, I will make her death greatly effect Chief. It is really an integral part of his character arc. That story was...painful. Um, yeah. That's all I have to say about that. I, for one, do not want to be burned at the stake at the hands of vengeful readers.

Midweekcomic13: Another good idea. Very unique, I'll definitely think about it! You guys give me too many options :)

AdamMc66: Why thank you! Regarding the Qurians, I am not sure why writers of other fics have the UNSC aid them, but I believe that the UNSC would sympathize with them in this situation, and would like to take them under their wing. That's just me though.

Guest: Oh god no. That would be an insult to humanity.

Eipok: The Covenant will show up soon. I'm not sure if I will do an Unggoy POV, though. I haven't thought about the version, really. Not sure on that front.

tco99123: That's (somewhat) canon; Humanity and the Sangheili enter into an Alliance following the war, which (I believe) is strengthened throughout the Reclaimer Conflict and the Sangheili conflict with the Jiralhanae. Regarding population, I might up it by a factor of ten. The numbers I use are canon, but they don't make much sense. Regarding the inventions, I'm not sure either. I am not too knowledgeable about ME tech. Regarding the excessive employment of deus ex machina, I have fixed the SoF incident. What do you think now?

The Writer of Fate: I can see that. I will try better next time :)

tpx1: Thanks! I am certainly going to continue.

bujian: I am going to explain this in the next chapter. Though your comment absolutely makes sense.

Eternity Wind: That's a great idea. I'll definitely consider it.

psychco789: I hope this chapter answered your questions. All ME ships are now armed with both spinal-mounted cannons and Thanix weapons.

bruto22: Technically, no. Before it detonated, there were no hostilities.

EoP: That's true. I will try to resolve that. Their weapons are definitely going to change. That's a given :)

8. Chapter Seven

[Date_2613.5.14]

{On the surface of Quorios, 5 kilometers Southeast of Thes'la; 0120 Hours}

Sergeant James Despencer, of the 12th Mechanized Infantry Regiment stationed aboard the cruiser UNSC *Moonlight Shadow*, ducked under a hulk of grey rubble as several rounds peppered his position, scattering the once-pristine alley with chunks of rock, metal, and dust. He disposed of the supercapacitor clip of his MA6, sticking it with fumbling fingers into a dedicated recharging pouch, as he sluggishly slid a fresh battery into the dirty weapon; the blue lights scattered across the frame dulled with dust, grime, and other assorted particles accumulated in the brutal urban fighting.

He glanced around, towards the other marines who had followed him into this hellhole. It was a pointless exercise; the green lights denoting the members of his squad had popped up on his HUD moments before. But Despencer was more of a traditionalist. Besides, he never lost sight of his men; the combat exercises several years prior at the Academy of Mare Nubium had drilled that behavior into his psyche.

He shouted into his helmet, the message being transmitted to all remaining members of his squad.

"Alright, there's no way we can make it down this alley alive. We have to flank the aliens; we should go through the building on my right. They're good though, I think they'll be expecting our visit. Be ready. Alpha-Zero, move out."

He received another round of green lights and nodding helmets, all ambient noise being buried under the screech of three F-42 Broadswords on a strafing run; the bright blue-white streaks of their primary armament lancing enemy positions on the ground several klicks to their right; the trails of countless missiles filling that localized section of sky with explosive wasps.

Despencer stuck a few squares of C-12 to a nearby wall, before ducking under another mound of what used to be a bracing column for a skyscraper. He activated the explosive; the thick gold wall exploding inwards under the force of the detonation, dust flying in all directions, further dulling the dim sun, lazily hovering high above the surface of the planet as a silent sentinel, recording the proceedings of death and destruction across the homeworld of the Le'Tso.

The Sergeant nodded once more to his men, and one by one they made their way across the alley and into the gaping hole. Despencer, taking guard as the men under his command momentarily exposed

themselves, braced his tired body against an outcropping. Sighing, he hefted his rifle over the rock, glancing through the scope. The display projected on his HUD quickly scanned the area in multiple electromagnetic wavelengths; the area was empty, even on infrared. The dumb AI assigned to his squad, referred to as Helios, but officially known as [HLS 2352-8], had not reported any movement from the amalgamation of their sensors, nor any activity on their communications network. They were either wearing armor which dulled their IR signature, or they were hiding behind an incredibly thick wall. If he had to guess, he would assume both measures were true. The standard marine armor utilized limited signature management, so it was not far-fetched to assume these soldiers would utilize similar equipment. Besides, they were clearly career soldiers. All of their movements were practiced, drilled, and efficient; their shots incredibly accurate; their coordination perfect and down to the moment. These soldiers were very capable, and left nothing to chance. Skilled, intelligent, and lethal. Their trek down the god-forsaken alley near the center of Thes'la had proven to be a perfect storm; an arena where these hostiles could showcase their skills.

Despencer and his Regiment had been ordered to access the center of the city; there was a large group of ODST's from the fellow cruiser Clad in Amethyst that were in dire need of reinforcement. They were holed up in a governmental tower in the very center of the city, taking heavy enemy fire from both infantry and armor. Multiple casualties. They did not have much time.

The NAV tool employed by his VISR system had highlighted this nondescript alley as the fastest route to reach their destination. Cautious as always, Despencer took point. He glanced down the rubble-filled passage, and upon seeing nothing, began to move forward.

At that moment, a large group of enemy soldiers, numbering far more than his squad, walked up to the entrance of the alley. By sheer chance, they sighted the UNSC soldiers first, and immediately engaged. Tiny rounds, each about the size of a grain of sand, flew down the alley at incredible velocities. Despencer had been hit several times, before he managed to take cover behind a nearby pile of rubble. His shields had held up fairly well; but he was mainly worried about the other members of his squad. Thankfully, they all had made it to cover, diving after bullets began to fly.

After the initial confrontation, an eerie silence descended upon the alley, as neither side fired or made any other discernable move. Realizing that any move on his part to directly engage the enemy would likely end in disaster, he decided to breach the wall and attempt to flank their position.

Despencer ended his reverie as he tasted the dust through his helmet filter. It had become clogged an hour ago, and smoke and dust coated his mouth in a dry veneer. He raised his MA6, checking once more that the supercapacitor clip, referred to as the S-Clip, was fully charged and ready to go. It was, as always. The MA6 was truly a beauty of a weapon. Rugged, accurate, and aesthetically pleasing, it reveled in the dance of death it partnered with highly energetic particles, launched in a beam of brilliant blue-white.

The building they entered appeared to be a residence of some kind. Various emplacements on the ground which appeared to be furniture

dotted the spacious room. Despencer, walking forward towards the door opposite their point of entrance, knocked aside what appeared to be a chair with his foot, the item sliding soundlessly across the slick floor.

Upon reaching the archway which denoted his point of egress, Despencer held up his hand in a fist.

Stop

He lowered his rifle, his body at the edge of the portal into the outside world. Dim voices could be heard, filtering from some point near them to their position. Despencer reached down to his side, his covered hand latching onto an M-Grenade, this specific specimen primed for a conflagration of napalm. He pressed down on the priming button, set the timer for three seconds, and lightly tossed the weapon out the door, towards the nearby sounds of guttural conversation.

Sounds of surprise and shock could be heard as the grenade bounced across the pavement towards the enemy, closely followed by the rapid pattering of boots. But they were too late.

Despencer could only imagine the scene at hand, as he heard the grenade burst open, fiery napalm spewing out of the vesicle in a massive blast radius; the viscous mixture sticking to wall and flesh and armor, burning at incredible temperatures through any and all organic material.

First came the burst, then came the smoke and the screams.

The Sergeant brought his fist down, and flew out the doorway. His HUD immediately tagged 20 hostiles approximately ten meters away. About half had been injured by the grenade; the rest were dazed and staggering.

He took aim at the nearest soldier, who had lowered his weapon in a firing position. He pulled the trigger, and a thin beam of accelerated electrons flew at the barrel at near-light speed, following the path of an ionizing laser towards the target.

The beam hit into the soldier with incredible force, any shielding they employed useless in the face of the electrons. The combination of thermal damage, kinetic penetration, and disruption of atomic bonds of the target area produced an effect which could only be described with one term: decimation. The incredible energy contained in the particles launched towards the soldier imparted their energy to the atoms comprising armor and bone and soft tissue, disrupting the very atomic structure of such barriers much as a cue ball impacts a racked group of billiard balls.

The pulse was concluded as soon as it was initiated, and the soldier collapsed to the ground, dead; his body broken, the point of impact smoldering and torn by an explosion caused by rapid thermal expansion.

The other soldiers under his command took similar aim, and multiple lances of lightning streamed across the clearing, felling enemy after enemy. His second-in-command primed and tossed an M-Grenade configured for plasma, the device detonating upon contact into a

molten sphere of blue plasma; the targets and rocks in the immediate vicinity of the explosion vaporized.

Despencer ducked into an alcove as the soldiers responded, themselves finding cover and returning fire. Several explosive rounds detonated upon contact with his shields, which whined dangerously low inside his helmet.

"Got him!" cried a young marine, as he struck the enemy soldier in the head with his MA6; that specific appendage disappearing under the hail of electrons.

"Seven left; the one 24 degrees to your left appears to be aiming. I suggest you--"

The curious, male voice of Helios was cut off as Despencer severed upper and lower portions of the soldier's torso with an extended beam. The action had fully drained his S-Clip, which was ejected and left on the ground, steaming and beyond repair or recharge.

The remaining members of the enemy party must have noted their lost cause, but they continued fighting with incredible tenacity. They were felled one by one; their loss being noted by the sporadic comments of Helios and cries of his squad-mates.

The last one to be killed was found lying against a flat slab of rock, sections of his armor burnt away, with blood leaking from multiple shrapnel-induced puncture wounds. The warrior, with markings on his armor which seemed to denote rank, spoke to Despencer and his squad in his guttural language, raising what appeared to be a pistol, aiming it at the Sergeant's face.

A dark-blue beam speared the man's head, and Private Spencer Johnson lowered his hand, M7 pistol in hand. Despencer nodded his thanks, and the squad continued on their way, the sounds of distant gunfire peppering the ambient noise of the deserted city.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.14]</p>

{Two kilometers southeast of the center of Thes'la; 0120 Hours}

Second Xiñ- Hesha Nañåç flew against a wall, feeling several ribs crack upon contact as the muffled sound of a nearby explosion filtered through his helmet.

He had been running across a thin street, relatively free of smoke and debris, making his way between the two massive skyscrapers of the Hanañ Plaza. It had appeared deserted, but as he ran as fast as his nimble legs could carry his form, he heard a soft whump, followed by a menacing whine, and he was then thrown against the copper wall of a nearby building as a warhead detonated several meters to his left, the explosion glowing bright yellow upon his retinas.

Dazed, his vision swimming, Nañåç thought back as to why he had been traveling this way, towards the war-torn center of the city. His squad had received word that a grouping of UNSC ODST's were currently holed up in a governmental complex in the center of the metropolis,

barely two kilometers to their northeast. They were to rendezvous with the Humans, and assist in any way they could, before waiting for extraction. Their immediate proximity to the Humans, as well as the presence of two anti-armor specialists amongst his squad, had likely shortlisted his group for this assignment.

As cautious as they were, the vast majority had been killed barely five minutes into their mission, when what appeared to be a singularity had been flung into their midst as they made their way near the edifice of a public library, glowing particles trailing the projectile. All except him had just been simply vaporized by the weapon, eviscerated and destroyed in the glowing-red hub of energy. Then, several rounds, which exploded upon contact with their target, began to fly towards his position. Lacking shields, and thus only protected by his armor, he had run into the sturdy library, sprinting through rows of paper books and digital records. Hundreds of meters later, he emerged into another plaza; this one pitted, scarred, and cratered, the husks of armored vehicles, burning and tossing smoke into the air, dotting the magnificent space.

He was only one kilometer away from his allies. He decided to make it their as soon as possible; it would be the best chance for survival in this wasteland.

From that point, he had run and run and run, dodging hostile patrols and squads as he desperately made his way towards the ODST's.

Now, he was lying against a copper-colored metal wall, his golden armor, red lights dotting the outside dimly pulsing, their power source dying, charred from the force of the explosion, presumably done by some sort of conventional warhead.

He had never been an exceptional soldier. Always middle of the pack, capable in all respects, but he did not stand out in any way during his evaluations. Except luck, as it seemed. He must have an abundance of that attribute.

His eyes fluttered open, before closing again, pain burning red against his eyelids, the fur on his back raising in apprehension and anticipation. He groaned, closing his fingers on the trigger of his reliable assault rifle, known as the Iagoa. Fumbling in darkness, he checked that the safety was off, and that the weapon was loaded with a full clip of ammunition, which it was, of course.

Then he heard footsteps. Those footsteps were presently accompanied by soft, yet urgent voices. Speaking in some sort of guttural tongue. Rushing sounds consistent with the movement of armor plating over an undersuit of some kind. The click of weaponry, the hiss of ejected heat. The sounds began to progress towards his position, the voices, stern and well-practiced, clearly voiced in his direction. The speakers, of which there were five, moved towards his position.

NaÃ±o opened his eyes, glancing from behind his visor at the newcomers. Covered in black, form-fitting armor, with different weaves signifying areas of greater or lesser protection, accompanied by thin plates of unknown composition. They carried various weapons. Most had a bulky, rather block assault rifle in their arms. One carried a rocket launcher, a freshly-loaded projectile apparent in the weapon's barrel. Another carried an elongated firearm, which

appeared to be some sort of sniper rifle. Overall, the group was well-equipped for any tactical situation.

Na'at'â quickly glanced at his options. He could either resist capture, or passively accept their intentions. The former. He noticed that his rifle, although not aimed at any of the hostiles, could easily be used. However, it was blackened, dulled, and smoking. To these aliens, it likely appeared broken and useless. A misstep on their part, but he would do well to take advantage of their error.

As they approached, the lowered their weapons ever so slightly, their voices, still stern, were not explicitly violent. Most likely attempting communication. He would grant them no such quarter; they had dared to assault and malign his planet.

Seizing the element of surprise, he pointed his rifle towards the nearest target, and squeezed the trigger with far more force than was required, his battle cry flying from his mouth towards the invaders, echoing off the buildings on the plaza. At that instant, the biological computer aboard his rifle detected the target as hostile, calculated the expected target vector, analyzed environmental conditions, and loaded a shell with a precise mixture of molten-gold rhubidium-molybdenum, which was then sealed and expelled from the rifle at incredible velocities with a chemical propellant.

The shell burst from the barrel of his rifle with a loud bang, and impacted the soldier within a microsecond. Or rather, shields which had sprung up at the last moment, presumably designed to protect the wearer from kinetic damage. However, the round merely burst open, ejecting the molten jet of metal towards the target.

The soldier's armor did little, if anything, to slow the progress of the mixture as it penetrated armor and skin and bone with incredible velocity, boiling tissue, the thermal expansion causing a secondary steam explosion which negated any cauterizing effect of the jet.

The man screamed, blood and tissue bursting from the wound onto the pavement as he tumbled backwards, blood trickling from his mouth, down his black armor as he fell down to the floor of the homeworld of the Le'Tso, his life ended.

Na'at'â repeated the process two more times, firing multiple rounds into his targets, enjoying in a sickening fashion the explosion of bone and tissue which was thrown from the soldiers' backs at the impact of his rounds under the hail of molten metal, before he was shot once, twice, then five times with one of the assault rifles, the burning sand-grain-sized rounds weaving burning paths through his flesh, his copper-infused blood boiling from the wounds.

Another hit his hand, and he was forced to drop his fearsome death-spitter-rifle. Yet another impacted his shoulder, tossing him back against the copper-colored wall. His breathing accelerated, his heart pumping blood through his veins and through his wounds to the outside world, ending his life even as it attempted to sustain the rest of his drained body.

He could do no more. He had failed. Those beasts were still roaming his beautiful planet, savaging his home. And he did not stop them. He was too weak.

As his eyes closed, unconsciousness beginning to envelop his mind, the butt of a rifle slammed into his temple, causing impenetrable darkness to close upon his consciousness.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.14]</p>

{In the center of Thes'la; 0125 Hours}

Captain Wyatt Dare of the 7th Shock Troops Battalion glanced out the window once more, scanning the horizon, which was lit with constant streams of gold anti-aircraft fire from the remaining Le'Tso batteries. He then focused his gaze on the ground near the base of the building which they had fortified, dotted with eviscerated bodies and smoldering armored vehicles.

The radio inside his helmet crackled.

Epsilon, what's your status? Over.

The Captain responded immediately.

Status is Alpha-Sigma-6. No sign of hostile activity in the immediate area. Possible movement in Sector Charlie-Gamma-05.

The Major responded.

Armor? Or just more infantry?

Unknown. Likely both; you know how they like combined arms.

Affirmative, soldier. Good luck. Zulu-Zero-Zero Out.

And then the radio fell silent, leaving Dare with his thoughts, the constant scans of the area surrounding the tower, and the occasional humming and murmuring of the dumb AI assigned to his specific squad, named Marathon.

The thoughts of the Captain turned up towards orbit as he leveled his M400 DMR once more out the shattered windowpane. From the radio transmissions he had managed to catch, things were not going well out in orbit. They were severely outnumbered. Rumor had it they were merely a sacrificial delaying force of some kind. For all he knew, the 9th Battalion could be serving the same purpose at the very moment.

They had been holed up in this building for several hours now, and with the status of the ships in orbit, he suspected that extraction would likely prove impossible. So they were stranded. Not unusual for ODST's by any means, but not a reassuring thought in any situation.

Then, a hollow noise rang out through the half-silence of the plaza. A lone vehicle, likely some sort of infantry fighting vehicle, accompanied by a small grouping of soldiers, all wearing that form-fitting black armor he had seen upon first contact with these beings.

Dare re-opened radio contact as he leveled his DMR towards the hostiles.

Zulu-Zero-Zero, this is Epsilon Actual. Contact reported in Sector Charlie-Gamma-05. One vehicle, ten soldiers.

The radio crackled, silent for a moment, before the Major responded.

Engage when ready. M9 Foxtrot will engage IFV.

Affirmative. _Epsilon out._

With that confirmation, Dare glanced through the scope of his rifle, magnifying the view displayed on his HUD. The reticle was placed on the head of the soldier closest to the IFV, who, judging by his gesticulations appeared to be conversing with one of his nearby comrades. Despite their socialization, they never let their guard down. Constantly looking up and around, keen and alert for an ambush. Career soldiers for sure.

A green light flashed on the far left of his HUD, followed by several more, signifying the readiness of his squadmates.

He pulled the trigger, and a beam of brilliant blue-white particles lanced towards the target at relativistic velocities, decimating the soldier's head in a spear of energy.

A red beam streamed from a position to his right, piercing the armor of the vehicle, decimating fuel lines, electrical components, and other vital mechanisms, resulting in a catastrophic explosion which ripped its way through the personnel carrier. Hatches blew open in a slew of flames, as smoke poured from every point of egress; the husk of the vehicle blackening at the intense heat of the detonation.

Multiple other lances pierced the armor and flesh of the nine remaining soldiers, felling them as quickly as their comrades one half-hour before.

As quickly as the ambush began, it was ended. The bodies of the ten soldiers laying blackened beside the remains of their vehicle, and relative silence once more descended upon the plaza.

Then a deep rumbling was heard. Followed closely by the tramping of boots and the whine of vehicles of varying weight. Distant shadows could be seen in the distance, creeping along the ground, accompanied by gunships hovering closely over low-lying buildings. Dare ejected the S-Clip of his DMR, slapping a new one into his rifle with tired hands, readying himself for the brutal, desperate fight which was soon to descend upon his position.

It was going to be a long day.

* * *

><p>[Date_2289.4.8]</p>

{Fifty kilometers southeast of alien city; 0430 Cycles}

General Avitus Marician sighed as he glanced at the holotable displaying the immediate tactical situation. His forces were making good time, taking minimal losses as they overran the defensive positions of the defenders. At least, they were taking minimal losses as they overwhelmed those he assumed to be the prime inhabitants of the planet. They appeared feline, and donned golden armor, wielding insectoid weapons which used some sort of chemical propellant. Primitive, but effective. The rounds appeared to contain some sort of molten metal which pierced kinetic barriers, armor, and flesh with disturbing ease. Thankfully, the superior training of his soldiers enabled his men to easily flank, out-maneuver, and divide the defenders, dismantling their places of opposition piecemeal. On that front, operations were proceeding at a typical pace, with all units reporting high operational condition.

However, mixed reports continued to stream in concerning another group of defenders, who were scattered throughout the city. From the video footage he had seen, these aliens used some sort of energy weapon. Deadly. Devastating for his troops.

He paled, thinking back to the footage, which had shown one of his men being cut in half by an extended beam, the chest of another being pierced in an instant, as another missed shot exploded a nearby boulder. They appeared to use some sort of kinetic barrier which even repelled the latest armor-piercing, explosive, and incendiary rounds. The latest reports suggested that their barriers easily batted phasic ammunition. At least, for a far greater period of time than the shields used by his troops.

Thank the Spirits there aren't more. He thought, flicking through the limited information his officers had managed to collect on this second group. They were clearly of a different species than the majority of the inhabitants of this planet; their body types were very different. Besides the limited information gained concerning their weapons capabilities, Marician was in the dark. That scared him. Turian military officers made it a point to collect a full picture of the enemy before attacking; anything less could be tantamount to suicide. Yet he was forced into such a position.

He sighed, thinking back to a recent report he had received. Apparently, a reconnaissance unit associated with the 10th Battalion had captured a prisoner. He might go, and witness the interrogation. If the reports from his technicians were accurate, they had almost developed a working translation program for the native's language.

He turned, about to leave, as a flashing red beacon appeared on the far corner of the holotable, denoting a message of the upmost importance. He opened it; which appeared to be a live video stream. As the file opened, the display on the holotable dissolved, reappearing to a scene of fire and death.

The face of Colonel Arcadius appeared, his helmet off, his face covered in dust, grease, and blood. Explosions and screams could be heard close by, as a force of Helax infantry fighting vehicles, led by twelve Kelos main battle tanks rumbled forward in the background, their large-caliber main weapons firing with abandon, countless missiles being launched as infantry poured out of their transports, rushed and seemingly panicked.

"General! We have come under attack 12 kilometers east of the city! We were only expecting mild resistance from native forces. We have been ambushed by a force of those _Demons_!" He exclaimed, the camera turning towards a dusty horizon, where many angular armored vehicles advanced towards the Colonel's position, levitating off the ground in a menacing show of technological prowess.

The camera turned back towards the Colonel. "We don't have much timeâ€¦we need air support, orbital bombardment, artillery, anything you can give us. We can't hold on much-"

The line went silent, the camera falling to the ground, as a beam of light pierced the Colonel's head, vaporizing the appendage.

Marician paled once more, gripping the holotable with clenched hands as he watched the enemy armor absolutely decimate his forces. Scintillating beams of light effortlessly pierced the armor and kinetic barriers of the newest armored vehicles produced for the Turian military; countless soldiers were mowed down from afar. It was a short fight, over in several minutes.

Unable to tear his eyes away, Marician watched as one of the beings, clad in all-black armor, his face covered in a polarized visor, picked up the camera. The _demon_ uttered something in his tongue, and the feed became one of static.

His breathing heavy, Marician turned away from the table. The grizzled veteran of countless campaigns in the Attican Traverse was truly afraid.

* * *

><p>So, my first ground combat scene! What do you guys think? As always, PMreview for any questions/comments/concerns/whatever.

I don't think it's as good as the previous chapter. Any suggestions?

* * *

><p>The Codex so far is here:

[document/d/1MB0WdAj3EBTQckHZTWRVAJbt0U-bNHL8bnTV2xZt87Y/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MB0WdAj3EBTQckHZTWRVAJbt0U-bNHL8bnTV2xZt87Y/edit)

It's on Google Docs; just copy and paste that into the standard Google Docs URL. You guys can view and comment.

I am also creating an excel sheet for ship information.

Codex questions:

1. Which Cormorant picture do you prefer?
2. Rapier specs?
3. Orion Station specs?

Also, I have many things to add, such as the new SPARTAN armor.

* * *

><p>Now for questions:</p>

FranticHamster: They do not. Yeah, no time to do so. Your idea for interrogation is really good, I think I will use it :)

southern-reader: I realize it may sound a bit..odd. I read a fic where the author utilized the word. To me, it denotes a soft, almost sensual voice. It's strange to describe, and really is more of an intuitive gesture.

tco99123: Yes, it was a bit rushed. I decided to add emotion too late, it seems. I think I will keep their technology separate. What need would the UNSC have for eezo?

sami217: Humans, mainly because of energy weapons. Tactically speaking, they're a match. Turians are highly skilled soldiers.

dghornick: I wouldn't go so far as to say that :)

MadKingHaywood: I may weaponize slipspace. That could be fun.

SergeantMeow: Exactly. It'll be fun, that's for sure. *jaws hit the floor of the Council Chamber* That is true, you bring up an excellent point.

Fer82: Maybe, but I did it as more of a balance thing. The speed has been doubled, which along requires a lot of energy.

Midweekcomic13: Pre-war UNSC had 800 worlds. We don't have any numbers for the Covvies. All we know is that the Citadel has explored 1% of space; no real numbers are given. No, there won't be sacrifice every time. That would get horribly boring after a while.

hornet07: I believe that all Council races would massively expand their navies in the 100 years after the Reaper War. Great point about the energy, I will edit the Turian slug speed.

Elucidinian: Well, that question has been answered :)

Kaioo: Maybe, but they have been transitioning the energy weapons, so I don't think they would focus too much on their MAC cannons.

Hattu: Oh god no. The Citadel never will.

Guest: I believe the metal mixture is actually hardened before it is fired.

9. Chapter Eight

[Date_2613.5.14]

{Unknown Location; 0400 Hours}

Second Xiñ- Hesha Naññ's mind began to buzz, his consciousness a dimly-pulsing glow in the smothering blanket of his sleep.

The spark, lit by his innate desire to know of his location, spread from neuron to neuron, across countless dendrites, spurring his brain into whirring action. His mind steadily awoke from trauma-induced sleep.

He groaned as he regained control of his mental faculties, red-hot pain lancing red across his eyes; burning wounds could be felt at various locations across his body, as well as a throbbing mass of pain on his left temple. It was caked with blood; that much he could tell in the darkness of his closed eyes.

He then opened his eyes, his pupils dilating immensely in an effort, albeit a vain one, to collect as many stray photons from the surrounding environment as possible. Alas, the efforts of his rods and cones were for naught; the room was completely dark. He slumped in his chair. For he was held in a chair, bound by uncertain means, held in darkness and silence, left brooding with his isolated thoughts and omnipresent pain.

He resigned himself to his position, his heart thrumming solemnly in the chamber, that organ the only constant of time in his temporary imprisonment.

After an indeterminate length of time had passed, distant sounds could be heard a long ways away. Isolated, chattering voices, accompanied by the sounds of boots on a metal floor. Those sounds came closer and closer to his position, as much as NaÃ± could ascertain, before abruptly halting in a location which seemed to him to be right in front of his cell.

After the voices halted, the noise of a flicking switch was heard, and the room was illuminated in a burning, white light. NaÃ± closed his eyes involuntarily, his pupils rapidly constricting in protest; pain streaking across his mind as he attempted to raise his hands to ward off the burning light. He could not, of course, for his hands were bound to his sides.

In his pained confusion, NaÃ± could hear three figures enter the room, their voices hushed, their conversation guttural, their language unknown. The aliens who had assaulted his homeworld.

Eventually, they too resigned themselves to silence, presumably waiting for NaÃ± to become accustomed to the change in conditions. It took several minutes, but he eventually reopened his eyes, finally able to see the true conditions of his seizure.

He was housed in a plain, featureless, gunmetal-grey room. The only piece of furniture was the one he was seated on. The light, burning bright above his head, only served to illuminate his body and the immediate vicinity; the vast majority of the room itself was cloaked in shadow, as were the three other beings who had entered some minutes before.

He could ascertain very little of them, as they stood in the border of half-light between the cone which encircled NaÃ± and the shroud of darkness which covered most of the room.

A door, nearly flush against the wall, was presumably their point of

entrance. A nearby box was likely a camera. So this was clearly an interrogation room. He was a prisoner of war.

As he absorbed this information, the being on the left spoke, in his native language, no less. He was using a dialogue generally employed by lower-class industrial workers. It was oddly fitting. His voice was stern, rather harsh, and commanded a mixture of respect and fear through its tone. There was a slight delay between the movements of his mouth, and the release of the words in his language. Some sort of translator was clearly transforming his words into those of his people.

"Your identification card lists you as Second XiÃ- Hesha NaÃ±Ã© of the Fifth Bayeh Regiment, stationed out of the garrison at Ll'anÃ«; Service Number 253902-A-C-13/B. Is this correct?"

He nodded, his mind still slightly clouded.

"Yes, it is."

The man continued in his speech, nodding towards the structure next to the door.

"Good. The interrogation may now begin."

The man on the right spoke next. He moved out of the shadows, and into the light. He was clearly far more muscular than the others.

"We will ask you questions, and you will answer. Do not try to resist."

Without giving NaÃ±Ã© a chance to respond, the man in the center spoke. His voice was more measured than that of the man on the right; more sophisticated than that of the man on the left. His speech professed rank and leadership, as well as tactical skill.

"Answer wisely." Intoned the figure on the left.

The man in the center raised his hand, warding off the figure on the left, asking.

"What is the location of your primary command facility?"

They were clearly cutting to the chase. They were not following some of the more conventional tactics he was taught in training, such as the "pride and ego" approach. They were direct and to-the-point; a trait which was also clearly seen in their military tactics.

He nodded, following standard protocol in the event of capture and interrogation by hostile forces.

"Second XiÃ- Hesha NaÃ±Ã©, Service Number 253902-A-C-13/B."

The man pursed his lips, evidently expecting this question.

"You must not have heard my question, Mr. NaÃ±Ã©. What is the location of your primary command facility on this planet?"

NaÃ±Ã© responded in kind, a smile of mirth gracing his lips.

"Second Xi- Hesha Na-¹, Service Number 253902-A-C-13/B."

The figure in the center sighed, nodding towards the bulky man on the right, who then proceeded to walk over to Na-¹, and slam his fist into his abdomen with incredible force. Na-¹ doubled over in his chair, his head spinning with stars; pain from the area flooding his mind, as the question was asked again.

He issued the same response, and they responded in kind.

Name, rank, and Service Number, for punches, the amount of which he eventually lost count.

His heart beating erratically, the gentle swaying of the burning light over his head was the only constant in a world filled with physical pain.

This arrangement; point and counter-point continued on for an indeterminate amount of time. Na-¹ felt ribs break, projectile wounds from the previous fighting reopen, and several teeth grow loose in his mouth. The man in the center, who had been watching the proceedings with an emotionless expression, once more raised his hand, causing the man on the right to back off, his fists covered in the blue, copper-rich blood of the Le'Tso.

The man on the left then opened a black case, producing a syringe filled with a clear fluid. The man in the center spoke once more.

"It is clear that you are not going to be coerced to speak by any physical means. I told you that we would get our information, and you chose not to take the easy way out. This will be highly unpleasant for you. I wish this was not necessary, but your lack of cooperation has drawn us to this action."

He nodded at the man on the left, who began to advance towards Na-¹, syringe in hand, a bead of the liquid forming on the tip of the hypodermic needle.

Na-¹ struggled against his bonds desperately, fighting to escape before he was forced to betray his country and his people. But it was in vain, his bonds held him fast, his limbs barely able to move. The syringe was inserted into a bulging vein on his left arm, the fluid pushed into his circulatory system with abandon.

He felt his mind begin to slip away, his grasp on his consciousness weakening. He tried to fight the tide, but it was too late.

The dam burst, and he was a floating ethereal being, answering only to the whims of the corporeal figures that surrounded his broken body. He felt compelled with every fiber of his being to answer their questions, so that he may return to his body and his true mind. He was not Second Xi- Hesha Na-¹; he was merely a repository for information, the valuable waters of which could be withdrawn by any passer-by.

So he told them everything he knew; the location of the primary headquarters for the Le'Tso Defense Forces, the remaining redoubts for anti-air batteries, and various convoy routes for resupply of the

forces engaged inside the city limits of Thes'la.

The interrogation thereafter was relatively short, for he put up no resistance to their prying.

Their last question was one which a remote corner of his mind found relatively odd, for it all could be found in the public domain.

"Who are the soldiers fighting alongside your forces? They aren't of your species, correct?"

"Ah, yes. The Humans, of the UNSC. The United Nations Space Command. From a planet called Earth. They found us, and swore to protect us; watching over as silent guardians to ensure our rise as a species. We're not a client race to them, but a race equal to theirs in standing, regardless of our technological position.

They're incredibly advanced. Easily centuries, if not millennia, ahead of us. Multi-kilometer long warships, thousands of them|energy weapons|portable shields|the power to decimate entire planets with ease. They have nearly a thousand planets under their control. And they have powerful allies, called the AIS. Made of three other races, who bonded in alliance with the Humans after a war which lasted more than a quarter of a century, and nearly destroyed the Humans. They truly are a magnificent people." He trailed off, his monologue finished, the well drained. For that was all he knew about Humanity.

The being in the center blinked, hiding whatever emotions he felt under a surface of stone.

"This interrogation is concluded. End recording."

And with that, the three swept out of the room, the light once more turning off, descending Second Xi- Hesha Na- into darkness once more as the drug began to be filtered out of his system.

* * *

><p>[Date_2289.4.8]</p>

{Aboard the Turian dreadnought _Beauty of the Cause_; 0530 Cycles}

High Admiral Clarius Arterius watched the conclusion of the interrogation session with an interested, curious, if apprehensive look on his face. However, as he played and replayed the prisoner's monologue and this "Humanity" and their "United Nations Space Command", his face became blanched, his eyes widening as they had when the troops under Colonel Acradius had been slaughtered but one hour prior, for he had made a fatal connection.

They had learned during the naval engagement that over the planet that the majority of the ships employed kinetic weaponry. However, six had been shown using energy weapons as their primary armament.

Arterius thought back to the battle. With the first wave of assault, losses had been|acceptable, if somewhat surprising. Though it was not uncommon for spinal cannon rounds to entirely gut even the largest vessels, the powerful kinetic rounds employed by these

hostiles seemed to just ignore such obstacles. Of course, it was merely a question of energy; their rounds were huge, and consequentially carried far more power than the slugs fired by the vessels under his command.

The result did not designate technological superiority; it merely demonstrated different kinetic technique, although he was sure the scientists on Palaven would have a field day dissecting one of the alien vessels.

These ships additionally launched thousands upon thousands of missiles, hissing swarms of fiery warheads. Slightly smaller than Disruptor Torpedoes, and possessing far better acceleration and maneuverability, they were nonetheless facile targets for his ships' GARDIAN systems.

However, so many were launched that hundreds made it through the gauntlet of laser batteries and impacted with explosive force against kinetic barriers.

What happened next was terrifying.

Upon detonation, a stream of plasma would spring from the warhead, diving straight into the target with incredible velocity.

The result was akin to turning a blowtorch on a scrap of wax paper.

Layers of ablative armor were boiled away and vaporized within seconds as the jets of plasma inexorably tunneled into his vessels, bisecting electrical wires, atmospheric control units; anything and everything made of solid matter in its path was vaporized within moments.

182. 182 of his warships destroyed by a single missile barrage. He began to shake, both in anger and fear; his fists clenched white as the muscles on his jaw grew more pronounced.

Then his vessels returned fire, hundreds of rounds streaking across the void at thousands of kilometers per second. He had expected the small fleet to be destroyed outright by the onslaught of fire, no matter their offensive capabilities they could not have kinetic barriers without *eezo*, after all. But then, as the rounds neared their final destinations, silver-gold shields flared from *nothingness*, merely shimmering as his rounds, dozens hitting each ship, were atomized as they impacted the barriers with tens of kilotons of force.

So the cycle continued.

Dozens more of his vessels were destroyed with apparent ease. He remembered how that cruiser, angular and grey-white, had taken dozens upon dozens of hits from spinal and broadside accelerators, a few fighter-launched Disruptor Torpedoes, and even Thanix weaponry before it self-detonated, taking yet another one of his vessels to the realm of death in the cataclysm of blue-white.

Then his blood ran cold, goose-flesh crawling up his arms, at the sight of those six unforgettable warships firing lancing beams of energy into the heart of his fleet, literally slicing entire vessels

in two.

Then came the field report from General Avitus Maritian. The entirety of the legendary 12th Armored Division, which had slain countless thousands during the Unification Wars, had quelled entire armies during the Krogan Rebellions, and which had spearheaded the Reclamation of Palaven; was pummeled into burning husks, columns of smoke, and energetic free-floating atoms under a hailstorm of fire. They had nicked the hide of the enemy, though; burnt-out vehicles and corpses would be listed on their manifests and rosters.

Then were the reports of a group of soldiers holed up in a tower in the center of the expansive, glittering city, ambushing countless patrolling squads with beams of red and blue-white energy.

And there were the hysterical reports of traumatized soldiers, reporting gleaming armor, glowing blades, and hidden faces. These were closely followed by drone footage of armor-clad soldiers; their barriers failing, their armor being pierced under a hail of explosive, armor-piercing rounds (standard issue since the Reaper War). They could never retrieve any bodies belonging to this mysterious enemy- they left no one behind, alive or dead.

The final piece of the puzzle was this interrogation session. Everything the prisoner had stated was true; one could not lie when under the influence of this serum. However, it was possible that he had false information which he believed to be true.

Logic ordered him to believe the statements made by the captive warrior. However, he hoped beyond hope that this force they had encountered was some sort of elite vanguard, stationed at the borders of this nation with their most advanced weapons and warshipsâ€|experimental, rare, and not standard issue.

Whatever the conclusion, he had much to discuss with the Primarchs.

He wondered whether these beings would send reinforcements. They must possess some sort of FTL capability, as evidenced by the fact that this planet clearly was not their homeworld. The fastest FTL speeds in the known Galaxy were hovering around 30 LYPD, the speed of the fastest Reaper (and Citadel military-issue) drives.

It would be prudent to expect this speed in their foes.

Not knowing the location of the nearest system to this one, Arterius decided to place his fleet on High Alert. He personally believed that it would take at least one day for reinforcements to appear, he was not going to take any chances.

However, they did not have a day.

They did not even have hours.

They had minutes.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.14]</p>

{On the outskirts of the Beta Hydri VI System; 0405 Hours}

{Aboard the _Hyperion_-class Assault Carrier UNSC _Consort of Erebus_}

Captain Quentin de Clare set aside the book he was reading at the moment, *The Stranger* by a 20th Century French author named Albert Camus.

Paper books, although not an endangered species by any sense of the imagination, were not commonly found on UNSC starships, where space was a premium, and materials and equipment for the purpose of making war got the highest priority.

He could never stand holobooks, though. Paper seemed so correct and organic. More like an extension of his hand, reaching into his mind, endowing him with scenes from faraway worlds and alternate realities and-

His runaway thoughts were derailed by the words of the AI aboard his vessel, named Arya.

Her form, ethereal and beautiful, slim, with dark tresses which reached down her back, appeared on the holotank next to his bed, upon which he was sitting.

"It's showtime, Captain. Time to start the fireworks." She reported with a sly smile.

He sighed, standing up, setting his book, dog-eared, on his bed. He could finish it later.

"Thanks. You know as well as I that I never would have left that book even if the Flood started attacking the fleet." He responded, with a smile.

"What else am I supposed to do with all my excess subroutines?" she replied with a wink, as de Clare walked out of his simple Captain's quarters, and towards the bridge of his vessel.

She was an interesting AI. One of the new generation not created from scanned human brains, she was born somehow from a virtual matrix many other AI's had created themselves. It was all fascinating to the Captain; he had seen forum pages speculating that Humans and AI's would eventually become one and the same, or something along those lines. Of course, nobody knew what that meant, but it was an interesting thought nonetheless. Ever since AI's had been admitted as full Human citizens of the UEG, popular discussion regarding Humanity's virtual counterparts had increased exponentially in nothing short of a cultural shift.

The bookish Captain arrived at the bridge, the door sliding open to reveal the quietly-chattering command floor, the seats entirely populated with his bridge crew. Always on time and ready.

He walked over to the command chair of the *Consort of Erebus*, and stood in front, his customary position when addressing the crew of his vessel.

A light flickered on, alerting him that his words were being

broadcast across the ship, and those throughout the battlegroup.

"Today, we go, once more into the howling void of war, not out of a fight for our survival, but for the survival of our friends, and allies, the Le'Tso. As you all know, they are currently under attack by unknown forces, the likes of which we have not seen. Yet another bloody First Contact. We will be swift, we will be strong. We will show them what it means to make a foe of Humanity by desecrating yet another cradle of Life. We will fight for the Mantle! We will fight for Life!"

With that rallying cry, he ended his speech, nodding towards the Helm with a softly spoken command.

"Let us go. Engage slipspace egress vectors."

At that signal, all personnel on the bridge turned towards their workstations, alerting all vessels in Battlegroup November to man battle stations and engage slipspace drives on the mark of Consort of Erebus.

Battlegroup November, largely consisting of vessels utilized in the Planetary Defense Fleets of Inner Colonies close to Earth, numbered 91 vessels. Included were 6 Valkyrie-class Colony Ships, 11 Aurora-class frigates, 27 Astraeus-class destroyers, 34 Eos-class cruisers, 5 Asteria-class carriers, 6 Aether-class battleships, 1 Hyperion-class assault carrier, and UNSC Hopeful, the famed mobile hospital under the command of the legendary Vice Admiral Ysionris Jeromi. In all, it could have more than dealt the largest Covenant fleets during the Great War. Clearly, HIGHCOM wasn't taking any chances with this operation.

With a renewed gush of bridge chatter, de Clare glanced out the floor-to-ceiling windows which enabled expansive vistas to the void of space, revealing his vessel transitioning into the dark realm of slipspace, with barely a shiver on the metal deck.

Prior estimates had placed their time of arrival at one hour, but those had not been based off reliable data regarding their slipspace drives. The trip would only take several minutes.

He sat back in the simple, minimalistic chair, watching the timer projected onto the primary holotable tick down towards zero.

Thankfully, Arya decided to distract his mind from such idle vectors of the imagination as she once more appeared on the holotank, having replaced her customary white sun dress for an elegant suit of armor, one which reminded de Clare of the armor used by the Elves in the ancient movie Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring during the scene depicting the Last Alliance of Elves and Men.

It suits her. He thought, a smile gracing his lips. She was indeed very cultured, yet she possessed a mischievous streak. Only he knew about it, though. Most of the crew saw her as her public face; polite, intelligent, and open to conversation. Very open to conversation. Unlike the Captain, she was an extravert, and proud of it. Emotive, talkative, and literary, she often talked with de Clare for long hours about books, the 20th century Impressionist movement

in painting, or the merits of Mahler's Symphony No. 5. They had truly grown to be close friends. As Captain, most had tended to shy away from him, but she had immediately taken a liking to him.

"Dressed up for the show? I heard it was a Black Tie event." He voiced towards the AI, doing his upmost to appear stern.

"I clearly never got the memo." She responded, hands on her hips, her slight French accent causing her voice to ring ever so slightly.

"Well, you'll have to show me the dress you would've worn, I feel deprived." He shot back, smiling.

"After the fireworks, my dear." She replied, laughing playfully, before she turned around and noted that the clock was nearing zero.

"Well, I better get a front-row seat. This isn't something I want to miss."

And with that, she sat down on the holotank, as the bridge of the UNSC Consort of Erebus sank down into the armor belt, holodisplays taking the place of windows, as the ship transitioned out of slipspace and into the system of the homeworld of the besieged Le'Tso.

* * *

><p>[Date_2289.4.8]</p>

{In orbit over Unknown Planet; Aboard Turian dreadnought Beauty of the Cause; 0600 Cycles}

Tension was dripping off the holodisplays of the vessel, the bridge crew having been on alert for over half an hour now, waiting for any sign that reinforcements were arriving. Of course, they never would have advance warning. Hence the frigate "screens" which were stationed some distance away from the fleet, waiting and watching for any disturbance which could signal the approach of an enemy.

All sensors were reading normal signatures, all COMM lines open and secure, when an operator cried out, his face flushed with shock and surprise.

"Massive energy spike detected towards the edge of the system! Sectors Alpha-152 and Beta-321 are reading peak signatures!"

Another sensor operator, this one in charge of monitoring the strength of local gravity fields, also reported.

"Massive spacetime fluctuations detected! It's almost as ifâ€¢the fabric of space itself is tearing apartâ€¢" she ended, nearly whispering the sentence, as a massive blue-purple hole suddenly appeared, rending the fabric of space itself, no stars being visible inside the inky blackness of the portal.

"Objects detectedâ€¢.unknown quantityâ€¢"

Dots could be seen in the distant tear, which then expanded into thin

forward antennae, which then exploded into the vessels of Battlegroup November, 91-strong, gleaming in the distant sunlight of the Octanus VI system.

"By the spirits, how large are those things?" whispered a weapons system operator, as High Admiral Clarius Arterius walked onto the bridge of his flagship, alerted by the noise generated by these sudden arrivals.

"By our measurements, 11 are between 575 and 700 meters of length, 27 are at 800 meters of length, one, the bulky one in the back, is around 1,000 meters in length, 34 run at 1.6 kilometers, 17 run between 2 and 6 kilometers, and the one in front is exactly 7,000 meters in length." Reported the primary sensory operator, his voice quieting to a nervously-vibrating whisper.

Following the Reaper War, more efficient utilization of eezo cores allowed ships to be built on average, around 28% larger than their pre-war counterparts. The largest standard dreadnoughts, such as the Beauty of the Cause, ran at around 1,280 meters in length.

Ships larger than 2,000 meters were thought to be simply impossible to build. The amount of eezo required to run such a vessel would likely bankrupt even the Asari. But then again, no element zero had been detected on any of these warships. But still, it just seemed impossible.

But there they were, gleaming white-silver, pulsing with scattered blue lights, no barrels of any kind visible on the warships. Elegant, lethal, and powerful. Not as imposing or pragmatic as the aesthetic style employed by his race, the composition of these ships simply radiated power.

No barrelsâ€|.energy weapons

As that chilling thought echoed through his mind, as well as the minds of the rest of his bridge crew, a faint crackling could be heard through the speakers.

"It appears as if they are trying to contact us." Reported the primary communications officer. "They have evidently toned down their communications protocols for our usage. Should I patch them through?"

"Yes, go ahead." Arterius responded with a wave of his hand.

He was grateful he had decided to wear his dress blues that day, as he stepped in front of his Captain's chair, towards the raised podium near the holotable which doubled as a point from which to officially hail other vessels.

The man nodded, and in short order, each and every screen and holodisplay aboard the bridge transformed into a singular image.

A being, average in stature, wearing a dark uniform consisting of a tunic, jacket, and trousers. In the dim light, it was unsure whether the uniform was black or charcoal in color. Various items could be seen hanging across the garments, which he assumed to be combat decorations of some kind. The being's hands were covered with white gloves. Upon his head rested some kind of hat, with some sort of

metal insignia displayed, notably a large bird could be seen on the emblem, its wings raised in flight. Another object could be seen to the being's side; it was likely some sort of ceremonial bladed weapon.

The alien, whom Arterius assumed to be of the male gender, was of average stature. Rather slim, he possessed a face set with storm-grey eyes, framed by high cheekbones. He stood tall and proud, and appeared rather intellectual, yet attentive. His eyes, inquisitive and curious, yet controlled and measured, betrayed great intelligence and creativity. The hallmarks of a talented commander. The impression Arterius had of this being was a favorable one. He did not appear to be a commander who would act rashly, despite his age. Though only his actions would qualify this definitively.

Many of his crew audibly gasped upon first seeing the creature, for it looked eerily like an Asari. Despite differences in skin tone and structures on top of the head, they were virtually identical. Something clearly to ponder later.

The being began to speak, the movement of his lips closely followed by a rendition of his speech in perfect, if formal, Turian.

"This is Captain Quentin de Clare, Commander of Battlegroup November, of the United Nations Space Command, under control of the United Earth Government. I hereby order you to cease hostilities on the planet of our allies and compatriots, and depart the system to your home territory. Your actions bear the mark of warmongering, and your invasion of the planet of a peaceful people is unacceptable. If you do not comply, we will use lethal force. You have five minutes."

With that, the transmission flickered, and was cut off, leaving the Bridge in a momentary void of silence.

"We cannot just leave!" exclaimed one of the xenobiologists aboard.

"They have no right to order us to cease legal military operations." Replied another.

"We will stay, upon our honor as Turians!" yelled a nearby guard.

"We do have a valid reason for our actions." Quietly stated a communications officer.

Placing his hands on his temples, Arterius leaned back in his chair to think.

It was true. They did have a perfectly legal, valid reason, according to Citadel Law, to be engaging in military operations on this planet. It was also true that merely running away on their orders would be frowned upon in Turian society, to say the least. He would certainly lose his command, if not his life. His family would be disgraced once again. He sighed, once more damning his society for being too proud. Besides, he would trust in the legality of their actions and the necessity of their mission. This species needed to be dealt with, so that their violence could not be enacted upon other peaceful races of the Citadel.

If it came to blows, they had a great numerical advantage. Though, if the ships from the first engagement were anything like these, he would need to pull off several brilliant maneuvers to secure victory. He thought it remote, but not impossible.

He had made his decision.

"Hail that vessel again." He ordered to the communications operator.

The loyal officer did as he was told, and the same image as before flashed on the holoscreens across the bridge.

"We have made our decision. We have every legal right, under Citadel Law, to be engaged in military activity on this Garden World. Additionally, it is our duty to deal with the threat this species presents, before they can begin a campaign of violence against other peaceful species of the Citadel. Their blatant disregard for Council regulations concerning the employment of Weapons of Mass Destruction is also unacceptable. They must be dealt with, and to do so is our duty as Turians." He stated resolutely, clear in his resolve, confident in his mission and his ability to make his point heard.

The man sighed, his lips pursing into a tight line.

"So be it. You have made your choice."

And with that, the line went dead, leaving the bridge of the Beauty of the Cause silent once again.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.14]</p>

{On the outskirts of the Octanus VI System; 0415 Hours}

{Aboard the Hyperion-class Assault Carrier UNSC Consort of Erebus}

The words spoken by the being presumed to be the commander of all local military activity left the crew of the UNSC Consort of Erebus stern in their resolve. The second those words had left the speakers lining the voluminous bridge; they knew what they must do.

Captain Quentin de Clare despised killing. War disgusted him. Yet it was something he must do, for the sake of the Le'Tso, and for the sake of Life itself. For the Mantle, and for the Duty of Humanity.

"All hands, to battle stations. We engage on my mark." He stated quietly, knowing that his words were echoed around his ship, and around the fleet.

The bridge was once more filled with a flurry of activity as weapons were powered up, defenses brought online, shields readied, Broadsword squadrons scrambled, and the like.

A slipspace fled to HIGHCOM was established, granting live video

footage of the engagement.

Arya, now standing in her holotank, had materialized a spear, and was holding it at the ready, waiting for permission to strike. She seemed slightly more excited in anticipation of events than the Captain.

She glanced towards de Clare, as all preparations were finished, and all warships in Battlegroup November reported their state of readiness. All pairs of eyes in the bridge turned towards him.

He took a step forward, and Arya readied her spear, as if to throw it towards their enemies.

"Engage." He whispered, as the AI let loose a battle cry, a scream of passion as she stepped forward and threw the spear into the void of cyberspace, her dark hair fluttering about her ephemeral form as the assault began in a burst of blinding light.

* * *

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><p>[Date_Unknown]<p>
[Location_Unknown]
/ Activating Tertiary BIOS /
:: Latent subroutines activated ::

{/ Number of [standard] years since last contact: 111,613 /}

/:/ Initiation sequence complete; estimated time until facilities are
at maximum power: 12.14253 [standard] minutes /:/

[-] Standard diagnostic protocol activated [-]

[-] Results achieved 0.00031353 [standard] seconds into activation
[-]

[-] Data analysis complete [-]

[-] All systems are online and ready [-]

/: Contact package being assembled /:

::/ Contact package sent; estimated time until arrival: 16.13425
[standard] minutes ::/

[] So we await the return of the Creators. []
```

* * *

><p>I sincerely apologize for the late update time. I will try to do better next time.<p>

As always, PM/review with questions/comments/concerns/whatever.
Thanks so much for taking the time to read!

* * *

><p>I have also created a UNSC ship Codex. I will post the link here, and on my personal info page. It is also not complete.</p>

/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0AsSXSG8LQIulEF1TkNDYkx1THlnak53eVVKVFBUTnc&usp=drive_web#gid=0

Just plug it in!

* * *

><p>Now for questionscomments:

Suprememopowerz: Yes, there will be many varieties of DEW.

Azazelicko: According to Merriam Webster, as a transitive verb, "decimate" means to "to severely damage or destroy a large part of (something)." I recognize the Roman heritage of the word, but my usage is correct.

SegreantMeow: I never stop being impressed with the length of your reviews! I think I will show the abilities of human armor plating next chapter (or the one after that). Your ideas are also very, very good. Thank you! :)

There will be better versions of ODPs... *grins evilly*

dghornick: I don't know, actually. Too long. I found most of the pictures on Deviant Art. I don't know. We don't have any hard numbers for Turian fleet strength outside of the number of Dreadnaughts they have. So I haven't really decided upon a number. Concerning the numbers of ground forces, to be honest I haven't really thought about it. You bring up a good point.

hornet07: I found them on Deviant Art. I haven't actually explored the durability of the armor itself, only shields. By the way, it isn't AHE armor. I just used the aesthetic. The UNSC is not as advanced as the AHE were during their war with the Forerunners. You bring up an interesting idea. Besides, Council Chamber squabbles could be fun to write :)

Trife: I never would do that. Wasn't ever planning to. No need to worry!

HaywireEagle: I see it as a logical step with regards to Human technological advancement. Human body armor on a whole was really rather worthless against plasma weaponry. Thus, it would make sense to add personal energy shields. Add 27 years of R&D during the war, as well as 60 years of post-war R&D, along with massive technological advancement from Forerunner tech/Covenant tech/proprietary Human innovations=personal shields. The SPBDU enhances bodily strength. Additionally, we can assume that Covenant energy shields are rather crude and inefficient. By using a more elegant design, the weight should be greatly decreased, as well as power requirements.

Eien Samsara: How could I not?

Concerned Reader: Against the Mantle, sorry :(

Midweekcomic13: Do you have any ideas for such a threat? I'm interested. Also, could you re-explain your statement concerning paragraphs? I'm afraid I don't follow.

tco99123: I hope I added this a bit here. Next chapter (or the one after) will have more ground combat, with a partial Turian focus.

ALLin: Great idea. I plan on incorporating this. Thanks! I was never planning on adding Shep, actually.

FranticHamster: I hope I sufficiently alluded to this here. Next couple chapters will see human ground casualties as well.

the ABC sucks: That's true. Massive oversight on my part. To be honest, I'm mainly focusing on DEW's for UNSC tech, so I wasn't doing to math for MAC's vs ME accelerators.

CookieMonsta1233: It would sure make for a great recruiting campaign, that's for sure. "Enlist today, uphold the Mantle." or something like that :)

Elucidinian: Could you possibly aid me on that front?

SpartanDog01: Yeah, I really screwed up there. Really wasn't thinking about MAC's with most of my attention focused on DEW's.

RandomReader: According to the ME Wiki, the mixture fired by the Thanix Cannon solidifies as it leaves the barrel.

Dotton: Mostly for convenience...I was too lazy to think of new names, to be honest.

AnonNot Hacker: Just imagine their faces at the Binary Rifle...but I have another cool beast for the UNSC. Wait and see :)

Lord of Admirals: Well, Forthencho, those are impressive specs for sure :)

EoP: I'd say Tier 2. They are definitely not Tier 1, not yet at least. Yep, they're regulars. Just imagine the Spartans. Well, napalm is just...goddamn scary. But you bring up a good point.

Onyx Sentinels are the bomb. Just imagine a fleet of thousands of those.

Kane: Well, thank you for that. I was glad to do the work, though.

Burgess: Doesn't really fit in with the Mantle, though. Sorry to disappoint.

Inheritor: Weaponize slipspace...?...profit

{On the interior of the Octanus VI System; 0416 Hours}

{Aboard the _Hyperion_-class Assault Carrier UNSC _Consort of Erebus_}

The battle had begun.

There was a momentary pause as swirling energies could be seen gathering at weapons emplacements, capacitors charging, localized shield sectors lowered, running lights pulsing forward in anticipation.

And the Hounds of War were released towards their foes.

Lances of blue-white energy streamed across the dark void of space at near-light speed, impacting the vessels of the hostile fleet at relativistic velocities.

Dozens of hostile warships were speared, the neutral particles impacting ablative armor and vacuum shielding and engine cores much as a cue ball impacts and scatters a racked group of billiard balls; anything and everything made of baryonic matter within the path of the scintillating beam was atomized in the extraordinary transmission of heat and kinetic energy.

Some were speared by focused beams; those appeared as if a hole had been punched from bow to stern. Red-hot metal could be seen ejected from the warships hit in this manner, tiny bodies sucked out into the harsh coldness of space, emergency lights vainly flickering red, the distant view of escape pods leaving the doomed ship for orbit.

Others, struck by a more unfocused beam which required greatly increased power generation capabilities, were literally atomized. There was a bright flash of extraordinary blue-white energy, glowing brighter than a star for a femtosecond before it dissipated into the quantum foam of the vacuum. Nothing corporeal remained of these vessels; save the detectable presence of high-energy particles and a light fluctuation in local background radiation.

Vessels were entirely gutted, their systems destroyed in an instant as electronics and power circuits overloaded, capacitors for spinal cannons released their energy in blinding explosions.

The beams then continued on to bisect another, and then possibly yet another vessel, before they were switched off to recharge.

De Clare watched as the warship under his command, UNSC _Consort of Erebus_, decimated over 40 hostile vessels in microseconds, their hulls fracturing and splintering under the hail of concentrated energy, bodies and ordinance and splintered fractured shards of molten shrapnel flying from decrepit husks as they floated, derelict and aimless in orbit over the lush world of the Le'Tso.

A total of 213 scintillating beams of particles had been launched towards their foe.

Well over 300 of the pragmatic warships had been bisected and atomized and utterly destroyed in mere moments.

Only primary weapons had been utilized.

One ship yet remained.

Presumably the flagship of the fleet, it had remained at the center of the group throughout the engagement. It possessed a different color scheme, with an increased prevalence of red, compared to the more balanced palate of red and blue seen on most of the other ships in the fleet.

De Clare felt sick. He had condemned tens of thousands of beings to their deaths; beings who had lives and families and passions. All for what?

He steadied his mind, and glanced towards the primary weapons system officer.

"Disable that vessel. We want the Admiral alive."

The man nodded, with an affirmative "Yes Captain."

With that command, an X26 NNEMP Cannon sitting in Modular Turret Emplacement Number 86 powered up, and aimed towards the vessel, sending a concentrated pulsating beam of electromagnetic energy towards the fleeing warship.

It was promptly disabled. Its engines disengaged, and emergency lighting could be seen to dimly flicker red through long-range cameras, the vessel continuing to move forward under force of its momentum through the frictionless vacuum of space.

"Send Fireteam Valravn for boarding action. Tell them to not take discharge weapons unless fired upon. Standard procedure."

As he walked out of the bridge to clear his head, the whirring signal commanding Fireteam Valravn to prepare for boarding had been sent through the ship's onboard communication network. The Cormorants would be launched shortly thereafter.

* * *

><p>[Date_2289.4.8]</p>

{Aboard Turian Dreadnought Beauty of the Cause; in orbit over Unknown Planet; 0605 Cycles}

This is impossible

High Admiral Clarius Arterius could not believe his eyes. He must have fainted. He must have been dreaming. It was simply.inconceivable. Hundreds of his warships, proud and powerful, some of the most recent to spring from the massive shipyards orbiting Palaven, Tuchanka, or Taetrus, were justgone.

Gutted and decimated in seconds, it frightened Arterius even more than the Reapers had.

Which in itself was an understatement.

He had blacked out; of that he was sure. His skin was clammy and covered in a thin film of cold sweat; his breathing ragged, heavy, and fast; his heart pounding in his mind and throat and ears; his muscles tensed and aching; his body limp and broken and defeated as his mind screamed the annunciation of his defeat into his flattened consciousness.

He had watched as 213 blue-white particle beams were launched towards his fleet.

So those vessels had not been a vanguard.

He had watched as dreadnaughts were gutted from stem to stern, cruisers entirely vaporized, frigates simply ceasing to exist. Clouds of atoms and free-floating molten debris replaced the space which had been occupied by living, proud, red-and-blue vessels proclaiming the honor and might of the Turian Hierarchy and the Righteousness of Citadel Law mere moments before.

He had heard the momentary, fleeting screams of tens of thousands of sailors and marines and communications operators and xenoarcheologists as their lives were ended; their physical forms vaporized or impaled by shrapnel or electrocuted by sparking crackling wires or sucked into the impossibly cold bare howling dark expanse of inky black.

He had seen the dots denoting his fleet disappear in an instant from his tactical holotable.

He had heard the gasps and cries of his bridge crew, as all vessels save his were destroyed.

They attempted to keep stern faces, but most were facing the same inner turmoil of their Captain and Admiral. Some had simply broken down. The loss of life and the immensity of their defeat were staggering. They attempted to resume their functions, with greatly diminished success.

His voice wavering, the man at the helm of the Beauty of the Cause turned in his chair, asking his Captain in a serious tone.

"What is our next move, Admiral?"

He remained silent for some time, his eyes glued to the angular, grey-white pulsing blue vessels of the opposing fleet, floating over one hundred thousand kilometers to his bow.

"Engage to FTL as soon as possible. We need to inform the Citadel of what occurred here. It is possible that they have found or jammed our Comms buoys. We can do no more here. Anything else would be a wanton waste of life."

The man nodded as another asked quietly.

"What of our men on the ground?"

The interrogative hung in their air for a few moments, the realization crashing into the Admiral of this once-proud fleet.

"We can do nothing for them. They have no option but to hold on as

they can. I will send a transmission to their local HQ as soon as I can. It is tragic, yes, but unavoidable."

The rest of the bridge crew nodded, readying the dreadnought for faster-than-light travel.

The bridge solemn and quiet, the customary chatter dimming slightly as the fatal transmission was sent to the commander of the forces groundside, was in a state of readiness to escape the field of death and debris which had emerged from the Turian fleet.

The Helm announced. "Transitioning to FTL on my mark. Five, four, three, two—"

He was cut off as the ship immediately fell silent, power apparently failing across the vessel.

Wires surged, electrical systems blowing, sparks flying across the cavernous space as darkness enveloped the CIC. Red emergency lighting flickered on shortly thereafter.

"What just happened?" asked Arterius as a few secondary displays flickered online.

"Looks like some sort of electromagnetic pulse weapon. Non-nuclear, from the looks of it. We're completely disabled, floating dead in the water." Responded the tertiary sensory officer.

Arterius sighed, the cold sweat breaking once more upon his brow. It appeared that the rest of his crew was suffering from a similar malady. The bridge fell silent once more save for disparate conversation; the customary sounds of pumps and holodisplays and other assorted electronics now absent from the room.

The rest of the crewmembers aboard the bridge of the Beauty of the Cause slumped in their chairs, apparently resigning themselves to the fate which was likely fast approaching their position.

The dusk was abruptly cut by a loud metal clang, a vibration which shook the floor and walls of the vessel, closely accompanied by a grating-metal-shearing noise which violently pierced the eardrums of the crew of the dreadnought.

Arterius blanched. He knew what was coming next.

"Captain, hull breaches reported on multiple decks! Consistent with boarding!"

It was over.

Arterius, shaking slightly, responded.

"Alert all crewmembers to lay down their weapons. I will not have more blood spilt on my behalf."

The man nodded, and presently the message was relayed across the PA speakers scattered throughout the vessel.

Shouts, screams, the clanging of boots and metal armor, and the distant peppering of gunshots could be heard. Apparently, not all had

decided to heed his orders.

He sighed once more.

He had failed.

He had permitted, through his failure as a commander, this immense loss of life.

He had allowed, through his actions, the wanton destruction of hundreds of warships and the obliteration of tens of thousands of men, many of them friends. Warriors, brave souls, proud and productive citizens of the Turian Hierarchy, who each had had something to offer. Now their contribution was naught; their lives erased, their families forever scarred. Because of him.

He had failed.

He heard the heavy thump thump thump of metal feet approach the sealed blast doors to the CIC. He stood, walking to the front of his men, and laid his arm down in a gesture ordering them to not attempt to harm these soldiers.

Then, the door exploded inwards in a small, if powerful explosion, bright blinding yellow against the predominant grey of the room.

As the dust cleared, he could see multiple figures.

Tall figures.

Massive figures.

Terrifying figures.

They had no faces; they were giants with polarized visors, standing as tall as a Krogan; covered in angular armor, they moved with an impossible grace, handling their weapons as if they were toys.

They were terrifying. They looked to be simply hyper-lethal. Able to kill with a moment's notice, without a touch of remorse or the batting of an eye. Demons. Yet, they seemed to move with a purpose. A mission which transcended that which they were assigned. Some sort of calling, perhaps?

They lowered their weapons as they walked into the bridge, slight head movements signifying a scanning of the room for potential threats.

Then, one of them spoke, in a dark, yet slightly lilting voice. A woman.

"High Admiral Clarius Arterius?" she motioned towards him, with a gesture which seemed to denote a question.

"Yes, that is I." he responded, doing his best to stand tall and resolute in the face of these demons.

"Come with us." The woman ordered, hard, objective authority in her voice.

He began to walk forward towards her, as another stated.

"Do not worry; we will not harm your crew."

Not reassured in the slightest, he began to walk in the tow of the massive soldiers, to an unknown destination. He passed several bodies, piercing wounds evident in their heads. They were clearly highly skilled marksmen.

As the bridge disappeared from his view, Arterius thought back on the events of the past, attempting and failing to fully internalize and deal with the occurrences of the past minutes.

It was over.

He had failed.

* * *

><p>[Date_2289.4.8]</p>

{On the outskirts of Unknown System; 0606 Cycles}

Hidden by the shadow exerted by one of the moons swirling throughout the pristine system, a small drone, only around 20 meters in length, whirred its engine. It had seen all that needed to be seen. It was headed back towards Citadel Space.

* * *

><p>[Date_2289.4.8]</p>

{The Citadel; 0607 Cycles}

Across the expansive public areas and vistas adorning the massive space station referred to as the Citadel, all eyes were turned towards a public announcement by the Citadel News Network.

Breaking News: First Contact Has Been Made ran the headline, scrolling across thousands of screens simultaneously.

Crowds flocked around vidscreens and massive holodisplays, pressing to get first-row views for the announcement; an event which had not occurred since the welcoming of the Raloi to the Galactic Community in 2185 (though they had made first contact with the Asari in 2184).

Presently, the view materialized into an elegant desk, backed by a political map of the Galaxy, where two Asari were seated. They both smiled pleasantly, and began to speak.

"This is the Citadel News Network, and I am Alenna Riala. Faleya Layeh and I—" and with this, she motioned towards her compatriot, who appeared to be of slightly greater age than the one presently speaking. "have momentous news to share with you all today. According to the latest reports from our journalists in the field, Citadel forces have established First Contact with a new spacefaring species!"

With this announcement, smiles could be seen across the crowd. They

were happy to introduce a new species to the Community; to uplift them to an elevated status assured by their ascendency to Citadel Space.

"The footage is as live as we can get from probes. We are not sure of what it contains, so I would brace myself for something amazing, if you ask me." She stated, pulling up a video feed, and flicking it onscreen.

"Here we go." She whispered excitedly as the video began to play. It was silent, for there was no noise to transmit in the void of space.

The view panned, and a piece of rubble came into view. Yet it was not rubble. It was a ship, or rather, what remained of the ship. Still producing power, it was sparking, emergency lights blaring, accompanied by the silent wail of klaxon alarms.

It was a Turian cruiser, and it was dead.

The Asari gasped, covering her mouth, choking as the camera panned more, to reveal a greater scene.

Two groups of ships. One clearly Turian, oneâ€|alien. Angular, grey, and pulsing with blue lights. They appeared to be facing off in some sort of confrontation.

Then came the lights. Hundreds of bright-blue-light thin scintillating beams of energy struck across the darkness of space, lancing their Turian targets at ranges of hundreds of thousands of kilometers.

Dozens of Turian warships were annihilated in instants, as the beams cut through multiple vessels at once, gutting them from bow to stern, bisecting others, before sweeping across the void to slice another proud warship in two.

It was not a battle; it was a slaughter. Clearly surprised at the attack, the Turian vessels did not have the time to return fire as they were destroyed and slaughtered piecemeal. The viewers could see entire ships simply beingâ€|vaporized by the massive alien warships; the swirling energies from which the beams stemmed looking as miniature suns.

And then it was over; the lances burned into the retinas of all who watched. Husks of Turian starships floated through the void; the alien fleet untouched.

The newscasters were speechless. They were pale, and sweating, and nervous. And incredibly frightened at the disturbing news.

"By the Goddessâ€|" she whispered, as she attempted to regain her composure.

"Itâ€|it is clear thatâ€|there was some sort ofâ€|misunderstandingâ€|" she stated, her voice wavering.

"they didn't have time to fire backâ€|.I am sure that the Turians are superior. They are the most powerful force in the Galaxyâ€|I am sure that this will be resolved peacefully. But never fear. If they wish

to attack us, they will have to destroy the united galaxy which threw off the chains of the Reapers!" she finished, gooseflesh visible on her uncovered arms, her voice ringing with a sincerity which she sincerely wished to feel, but could not after being exposed to such disturbing images.

"This isâ€| Alenna Riala from the Citadel News Network, signing off. Good day to you all." She whispered, as the feed cut to a commercial for a long-range cargo haul service between Ilium and Tevura.

* * *

><p>[Date_2283.4.8]</p>

{The Citadel; Council Chambers; 0609 Cycles}

Councilor Tevos sat back upon the chair upon which she had sat in for centuries. She had seen much in her time, but this was an unprecedented breach in decorum and security. She was furious.

The other two councilors, Constantius and Heshern, hurriedly rushed into the room, and sat down. They had much to discuss.

The Asari glanced at her Turian counterpart, her gaze inquisitive, not revealing the rage which simmered in her mind.

"Would you care explaining how this wound up on the Citadel News Network mere minutes ago?" she asked sternly, her carefully-crafted veneer peeled slightly to reveal her simmering rage.

The Turian had seen the video. Yet he blanched again at the destruction wrought upon his forces by an unknown foe.

"I do not knowâ€|you know as well as I that we have no control over those who run the Citadel News Network. They're freelancers; they will do all they can to improve their ratings."

He paused, before continuing.

"I did not know what had happened over this unknown planet until the video had been released to the public domain. The last report we have received was several hours ago. It informed us that they had suffered, in the words of Admiral Arterius, "moderate casualtiesâ€|fierce enemy resistanceâ€|gaining the upper hand." Having not received a communiquÃ© since, I had figured that everything was proceeding as planned.

He nodded towards the other Councilors. They had been informed of the military operations the Turians were planning to undertake, following the incident with the nuclear detonation near the lush garden world. They had, understandably, given their consent for military intervention.

"I had received word from Palaven mere moments after I had viewed the video, that they had managed to sneak a probe through the relay, and towards the planet. It appears the Comms buoys had been jammed, somehow. Additionally, we know that the Beauty of the Cause, the flagship of the fleet, was spared in the attack. All personnel aboard have presumably been taken captive by these aliens."

The Salarian Councilor spoke, his eyes bright.

"Interesting. Buoys have the highest-end electronic warfare countermeasures available. This suggests much about their capabilities in that arena."

The other two nodded.

"What now?" inquired the Turian.

"Now, we wait. It would not do to send another group of ships; we cannot risk them firing upon ambassadors. If they have indeed captured the *Beauty of the Cause*, then they likely know where the Citadel is. It will be a sign of strength if we let them come to us. We need to inform them of our unity, and our resolve. It will likely entice them to join the Galactic Community, after decades of wandering alone. However, I suggest we heavily reinforce the Citadel Defense Fleet. A show of force would not hurt. Besides, I doubt they have many more ships than those we have seen; it would make sense for these beings to commit an extraordinarily large force to retaking their world, or that of one of their allies."

"I concur. Your thinking is sound." Quipped the Salarian.

The Turian nodded his assent, and stood to leave. He had an urgent meeting to attend with the Primarchs.

The Salarian left shortly thereafter, leaving the elder Asari alone in the bright, elegant chamber.

She watched the footage again. It was possible that these weapons were not truly energy weapons. After all, it had been discovered that the Reapers did not, in fact, utilize directed energy for the primary weapons aboard their starships. Besides, the Turians clearly had been caught by surprise. It did not appear as if they had the time to respond to such a devastating attack.

The strength of their offense suggested, to her, that they may focus purely on offensive capability, in a manner similar to the Geth. This would imply that their defenses were relatively weak.

An interesting thought, but it would be irrational to come to any conclusions. More analysis would be required.

They had to meet these beings first, though, before any investigation could truly begin.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.14]</p>

{On the interior of the Octanus VI System; 0420 Hours}

{Aboard the *Hyperion*-class Assault Carrier UNSC *Consort of Erebus*}

Captain Quentin de Clare quickly walked away from the bustling bridge of his vessel. He needed air. He needed time to himself. He had been in naval engagements before, but the scale of this was unprecedented in his experience. He was fine. Perfectly rational. But he needed

time to think and absorb information. Besides, the Captain of a vessel often retired to his quarters following a naval conflict to write a report concerning the hostilities. He could thus kill two birds with one stone.

He walked into his simple, spartan Captain's quarters, and sat down at his desk. He pulled out a sheet of paper and a pencil, and began to write. The other items which consumed the majority of space allotted to personal items, de Clare had found that writing was the only activity could sufficiently clear his mind from its turmoil and darkened storms. So he wrote, pouring his mind onto the bright white paper, his black pen dancing across the page.

'The gun was raised. The gun spat of its own accord. The lead flies under the glimmering chandelier and wavering whispering voices under the chandelier gleaming in passion at its unchosen destiny as it collided with blood and bone and flesh and red circular crystals of life itself flew out against and impaling the steel-grey-dead wall under the ethereal diamond chandelier.

The sun and the whispering voices echoed around the lifeless featureless cavernous cave banked by rows of honey elevators leading upstairs and downstairs and nowhere and the voices were worms and the dead-eye-life-sun a boring yellow-orange drill which drained him of himself and the voices and the vibrant grey matter of his being and his heart.

Filled nothing, the void, insulin, and shock.

I love her yes I love her

Did you love her did you

When she touched me I died

The roar of the voices and the missiles of the mind and explosive and screaming shattering the machine-guns under the pale moon and ruby chandelier.

The bushes falling into the road becoming the road fading into snow-capped mountains and doctors with needles, craters and faces and the defeated hand raising the instrument under the emerald chandelier.

Then he felt her voice and heard her soft hand in his as her glistening emerald eyes stared into his the deep beautiful pools enveloping his consciousness saving him from the inexorable march of death and decay and the graves fading into the dusty empty ground as the bushes ran into the road and the road became the hazy green bushes under the shattered emerald chandelier.

I love you yes I love you I will never leave I will be there when you wake

And her voice sang as her eyes leapt with passionate fire and the world faded to black as the metal instruments gleamed with anticipation as they pierced skin and muscle and sinew and bone and the walls heard his screams as they echoed over the hallway out the groaning window into the steaming raining booming night and the world was nothing and night and darkness and the call of the void was

answered under the falling shattering crystal chandelier.'

He finished his writing, setting his pen onto his foldaway desk, his breathing measured and calm. He would write the report later.

His actions had resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands. But they had saved the lives of millions.

It was for the greater good. For that of his men. For that of the Le'Tso. For they would have met their fate at the barrel of a weapon had he not acted.

Information had been disseminated across the battlegroup that this race was highly militaristic. HIGHCOM had found it doubtful that they would accept any sort of ultimatum. The presence of the massive fleet over the planet suggested an intent rather synonymous with planetary occupation. Something they would never allow on their lives; hence the arrival of Battlegroup November in full force.

He had given them a way out. They had been offered a resolution. Yet they had refused.

He had been prepared for the result. He had participated in minor engagements before. Yet this was far larger than the minor battles in which he had been engaged previously.

His mind flashed back to simulations and lessons of the Great War. How no quarter had been given; how hundreds of planets were burned.

That was why he joined the UNSC; to protect those who could not protect themselves; to save the innocent from the snapping jaws of chaos and indiscriminate destruction and hate.

The power he had wielded frightened him; the deaths he had ordered saddened him. Yet it was his duty, and he must not shrink for it.

He was rational, he was logical, and he was a commander. He presumed most warriors felt these emotions at one point or another during their careers; he found it natural to feel such in the wake of death. Yet he would not let this turmoil control him, not that it had in the first place. It had never surfaced before, and it would never surface again. He would not fail. He would permit himself to feel sadness at the destruction of life, yet he reconciled himself with the stark truth that, much as tumors must be excised to save the organism, life must be destroyed to ensure the survival of the rest of the species flung about Living Time.

For the Sanctity of Life itself.

A light flickered in his peripheral vision. He turned around, his face controlled, yet his mouth had formed to a thin line, creases of thought forming on his brow.

It was Arya. She appeared concerned, her face serene, her eyes looking towards his, with a mixture of compassion and sadness.

She sat down on her pedestal, asking. "What ails you?"

He sighed, glancing at his companion.

"I am just feeling residual guilt from my actions. It was necessary. I knew what I must do. But that does not grant me much recompense, though it should. And yet, in my guilt, I feel some strange modicum of pride. Which disturbs me." He mused.

She stood up, her arm reaching out, meaning to touch him. Yet she could not, of course. She was digital; he was organic.

"You are allowed to feel sadness, and even guilt, at the deaths of others. But you knew what you had to do. Remember, you were liberating an entire face from an aggressive, possibly genocidal foe."

He shuddered slightly. "I knowâ€¦but that doesn't change what I did, or how I feel."

She responded in turn. "And that is what makes you a Captain. You are remorseful. Warriors should not revel in their kills. You cannot change what you didâ€¦you must come to peace with it. Think of a peaceful memory, or something or someone who makes you feel at peace. Besides, I like you all the better for your morality. It is part of what makes you who you are. Like your books."

She gave him a light smile, before continuing.

"I have informed your Commanding Officer that you need your rest. Go to sleep, Quentin, you need it. That's an order."

He sighed, nodding his head.

She then disappeared back into the systems of the _Consort of Erebus_. She made sure to place a monitoring program to watch over his movements. She was sure he was going to have a rough night. She also made sure to lock his door, with clearance only she or his Commanding Officer could override. He needed his rest. She had read what he had written; she was worried about him. She cared for him. If only she could touch him, she could possibly help him more, but she was only an AI. Not a Human. Not an organic. She was essentially a Human, but a Human without a body. So in the eyes of some, not a Human at all. She sighed as she went about her task of running the _Consort of Erebus_, checking on the Captain every few minutes.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.14]</p>

[Minutes; Emergency Session; Committee of Minds for Inquiry; 0420 Hours]

[^] This session has been called to order to discuss the transmission which we detected exactly 1.23514525 [standard] minutes ago [^]

{*} For the Purposes of this Committee, will the text be stated in these minutes? {*}

[*] The transmission runs as follows:

'Come, Reclaimers, to retrieve your Inheritance. For you are not only the heirs of Those Who Came Before, but of yourselves.'

It is accompanied by a set of coordinates, which lead to an unclassified area of space at the edge of the Orion Arm. [*]

{ / } The Office of Naval Intelligence received this communique as soon as we did. They are currently preparing to venture towards those coordinates. They will arrive in little over twelve[standard] days.
{/ }

[] Speculation concerning the source of this transmission is varied, but evidence is lacking. It is possible that it could be related to the history of the Forerunner Ancilla 343 Guilty Spark, known officially as the Bornstellar Relation. []

[/] That is possible. Communications protocols are strikingly similar to those utilized by current forces. More investigation is required.
[/]

[^] This meeting is adjourned. The investigation shall commence.
[^]

* * *

><p>Author's Note:</p>

Regarding the emotional outburst of Captain de Clare, I do not see it as a weakness. In literature, warriors are too often portrayed as soulless killers, who feel nothing at their deeds. I believe this is unrealistic, and unfair.

In injecting Humanity into their minds, in giving them remorse, we make these characters more substantive. More real.

The fact that he needs to cope with his actions does not necessarily mean his command will be compromised. Remember, it was his first major naval engagement. Most soldiers are traumatized at such events. It is a process in which he will learn to cope with such overwhelming feelings. It would be unrealistic to expect otherwise.

Also, when writing his character, I believed that making him far more of a moralist would make him unique. Remember, those who are the most suited to be politicians are those who do not actively seek power.

* * *

><p>Additionally, I am thinking of making Orion Station a Human-only installation. There would be animosity between Humans and former Covenant races for decades, if not centuries after the War. Despite the fact that successive generations would bear more goodwill, and the acceptance of the Mantle, I find it hard to believe that the two factions would be as buddy-buddy as most authors portray them as being.</p>

What do you guys think?

If I made OS Human-only, the Covvies would likely have their own counterpart, which could be orbiting each other? That could be cool.

* * *

><p>As always, PM or review with questions comments/concerns! Thanks so much for reading!

What do you guys think of the Codex? Any suggestions there?

* * *

><p>Now for questions:<p>

hornet07: It still might be :)

I will go more into detail later about the process of AI creation.

I am still unsure what to do concerning Cortana. Help!

NathanHale2: Thanks for your suggestions! Make their fate terrible? I might, currently thinking on it :)

Hazzamo: Well, the Reapers are just...kind of...weak. There is no way the Precursors would have created the Reapers. Just look at the Star Roads and Unbending Filaments...the Reapers are just pathetic in comparison. Good idea though.

FranticHamster: I plan on it! I am not sure how I will have the UNSC act towards the Citadel, militarily speaking. You bring a good idea to the table, though.

randumbdave: All within normal parameters? Nice to know :)

Both are on my author page.

tco99123: True, I will try to take this into account next time.

Elucidinian: You bring up a very good point. That's a great idea, actually. I can just imagine what the _Point of No Return_ could do to Citadel communication networks.

Midweekcomic13: Have I improved here? Slightly?

AdamMc66: Although I may have them meet in the Citadel, I will keep things civil. Besides, the Keepers would freak otherwise.

ElldenStorm: I may just use this as a speech before battle :)

Supremeopowerz: You bring up a good point. I was just trying to introduce some measure of variety. I will remember to stay consistent, though.

11. Chapter Ten

[Date_2613.5.14]

{In orbit over Quorios; Octanus VI System; 0920 Hours}

{Aboard the _Hyperion_-class Assault Carrier UNSC _Consort of

Erebus_}

Captain Quentin de Clare walked from his quarters onto the bridge of his vessel. His men had been deployed planetside several hours before to assist the remaining UNSC and Le'Tso troops in defeating the aliens.

"How is the assault proceeding?" he asked as he walked over to the holotable, leaning over the device with his hands on the edge of the projector.

"Very well. Reconnaissance reveals that they have retreated towards the Western bank of the Lya'eh River; a position which possesses great potential for an effective defense. Our forces have met fierce resistance, but casualties have been far less than expected. All offers of surrender have been met with a negative response." The man reported, as information swam on his holodisplay.

De Clare sighed. They were a highly militarized people, as well as an honorable one. Not unlike the Samurai of Japan millennia before, or the Sangheili of the contemporary era. It appeared as if they had no choice but to fight this foe until their last soldier fell.

"Very well. Bring us around the planet again; I want us ready in case they decide to send naval reinforcements through the Tuning Fork."

The helm nodded, as the massive vessel began its trek once more around the verdant planet, all sensors aimed towards the 15 kilometer-long object at the edge of the Octanus VI System.

* * *

><p>[Date_2289.4.8]</p>

{Five Kilometers Southeast of Alien city; Unknown Planet; Unknown System; 0900 Cycles}

General Avitus Marician grimly removed the high-powered thermal binoculars from his eyes, his mouth set in a thin line as he surveyed his tactical options.

Enemy forces were advancing on all fronts. He had limited air support, possibly only one artillery piece left at this point. The enemy had orbital supremacy. They would have air dominance in one hour, at maximum. Most of their armor had gone down in the attack which had resulted in the death of Colonel Arcadius, who had been one of his most trusted, and brilliant, compatriots. A dire loss for the Turian Hierarchy.

He had been informed approximately three hours prior that their forces in orbit over this unknown, hostile planet had been absolutely annihilated by an unknown force. He had received one last transmission, informing him that the _Beauty of the Cause _was readying itself to transition to FTL, back towards Citadel Space, presumably to fetch reinforcements. He was not sure if they had made it.

At least, that was what he had been led to believe. He knew they weren't coming back. It would require far too great an expenditure of

naval forces which were already deployed on missions across the Galaxy on peacekeeping missions, anti-slaving missions in the Terminus Systems, and the like. Sure, they had many thousands of vessels in their navy, but their role as Galactic Peacekeepers rendered precious few for independent naval missions. Sure, they had increased the number of warships in their navy more than twofold, but with the devastation which followed the close of the Reaper War rendered entire planets controlled by criminals and other lowlifes.

Galactic Society, in some sections of Citadel Space, was true anarchy. The need for Turian men and ships for peacekeeping and the enforcement of Galactic Laws was so great following the war that their buildup was essentially a nonstarter; they had little more ships at their disposal for these kinds of missions than before the war.

Yet another massive naval expansion would be needed to combat these beings, if this conflict was not resolved soon.

Of course, ships could (and often were) summoned from planetary defense fleets, but such a move was often looked at with suspicion by the other races.

If the damn Asari would only get their act together, and stop scheming for the sole advancement of their goddamn economy and influence, then they would have more ships for times such as these.

Not like the Salarians were any better.

He sighed, finishing his musings on the realities of galactic politics. Despite his frustrations, the role the Turians played was a necessary one, after all. Someone needed to raid slaver's dens and bring order to the Attican Traverse.

The Batarian Hegemony was still in ruins, after all. He doubted the area would ever truly recover.

His radio crackled, and his mind snapped back to the smoke-covered horizon and the immediate tactical situation.

"Commander, the 26th Armiger Legion reports massive enemy presence! They're pushing!" screamed the distorted voice through the radio. The edge of panic could be clearly heard in his voice.

"Send the 4th through 7th Battalions to meet their advance." He responded, moving the symbols which represented those units towards the current location of the 26th Armiger Legion.

"But we need more troops!" the voice paused momentarily "They're advancing! We're being overrun! We'll hold our position as long as we—" and the radio went silent into a shifting phase of static.

He had expected as much. They had great numerical superiority. However, his men, at least when facing the gold enemies, had the tactical advantage.

The other force...was frightening. On par with the best of his men in battlefield demeanor and tactics, they clearly had a technological

edge. His latest intelligence reports suggested that more were streaming from ships in orbit to reinforce their compatriots on the ground.

It was likely a force of those aliens which had overrun the legendary 26th Armiger Legion with such a ferocious speed.

They were foes to be respected and feared. He was honored to meet them on the great canvas of battle.

At that moment, his radio once more began to blast the incoherent panicked screams of men, as innumerable red dots appeared on the holotable at the edges of the remaining ground his troops controlled.

From every cardinal direction, his forces were being assailed by the second enemy. They were clearly outnumbered, almost certainly outgunned. It was an impossible situation; a zero-sum game.

As he ordered the remaining forces under his command to retreat to a defensible redoubt near his location, a very slight smile appeared on his face. His fate had been settled. Yet he was grateful that his fate had led him to represent the Turian Hierarchy on their native plane, fighting such fearsome foes. Enemies to be seen as powerful warriors. Fearful, yet respected. He would show them the might of his people, even if they were to meet the spirits in the end.

He was glad to dance his last dance on the chivalric field of battle with his most trusted soldiers, fighting a powerful enemy. The dance would end in his death, of course, but it would be a beautiful, dark dance nonetheless. A dance to be remembered; a dance for the ages.

* * *

><p>[Date_2289.4.8]</p>

{Four Kilometers Southwest of Alien city; Unknown Planet; Unknown System; 0905 Cycles}

Corporal Lucius Verus ducked out of an archway, the screaming of enemy combat aircraft directly overhead as he heard an explosion several kilometers to his north, likely denoting the destruction of the last of their artillery pieces.

Damn.

At first, their assault had been extremely successful. They had succeeded in routing the presumed natives of the planet with little effort; the Turians tactically outmatched their enemy.

At least, the assault had been successful on all fronts save those which assailed a group of the _demons_, as they were referred to on the local battlenet.

They looked like demons as well. Dark armor, gleaming with blue lights, their faces covered with polarized visors.

Verus saw in the dim dusty light permeating the street that a group of those second soldiers was walking towards their general position, their heads glancing around at the surrounding buildings in a fashion

which denoted alertness. Likely some sort of patrol. They had to be dealt with before they could make their way to the redoubt bordering the river at the edge of the city.

He raised his hand, alerting the other members of the squad who were standing behind him, or within various scattered alcoves around the street, yet always within eyesight of their leader.

He opened communications channels with the other soldiers under his command, and began to speak.

"There is a small grouping of enemy soldiers some distance away. They are moving towards us as we speak, but they are not aware of our existence at the moment. We need to eliminate them. Remember, their barriers and armor are highly resilient. Controlled bursts of APHE should do the trick. Once their barriers are down, try to aim for a single area to maximize armor penetration. May your aim stay sharp. Good luck."

Verus checked his weapon, an upgraded variant of the trusted Phaeston assault rifle, which had been used to great effect during the Reaper War. Now, Armor-Piercing High Explosive ammunition, which had been specifically developed for the Krysae anti-mat^{rial} rifle specifically to target the Reapers was standard issue for all Turian firearms. Even though more than a century had passed since its adoption, the Phaeston, heavily upgraded of course, was still an excellent rifle by any sense of the imagination.

He was glad to be using it against these hostile soldiers.

He took aim, his targeting reticle overlaid on the center of the soldier's head. His HUD displayed wind speed and direction, ambient temperature, and other useful ballistic data as it calculated the necessary aim point for near-perfect accuracy.

"Fire!" he yelled as he pulled the trigger of his weapon, sending a storm of armor-piercing, high explosive rounds downrange, the tungsten carbide rounds flying from sabots, encasing a small payload of high explosive streaming towards the target at an incredible velocity.

In a near-instant, the rounds hit home, and the being's barriers flared a gold-silver color. Fortunately, two other members in his squad had chosen this soldier, who had taken point, for their first target. Dozens of rounds peppered his shields, which appeared to be weakening.

Once again, he was thankful for the increased rate of fire which had been incorporated into the newest model of the Phaeston, made possibly by greatly improved thermal clips.

Much to the misfortune of these soldiers, they had been caught in the middle of an expansive boulevard. The road, for nearly the entirety of its length, was strewn with chunks of rubble from nearby buildings, crashed and mangled personal vehicles, and other miscellaneous pieces of rubble. They had likely been traveling along the sides of buildings, as his squad had been doing, but forced out into the exposed open due to some sort of obstruction. This specific section of the road was, for whatever reason, nearly completely clear of obstacles or anything which could be used as cover.

They had been caught in the open; a soldier's worst nightmare. They had nowhere to run.

The being, his shields appearing to be near the breaking point as more rounds peppered the barriers, miniature explosions dotting the form-fitting barrier, recovered quickly from the onslaught, as expected.

He raised his rifle and fired, a bolt of gleaming energy flying from the barrel. It flew past Verus, heating the air in its path to an incredible temperature, as the stream hit the man who had been standing slightly to his left. Killed instantly, destroyed by the beam, the horrible sound of instant evisceration worming its way through his helmet.

The being's shields had failed the moment he had killed the Turian, and several more rounds impacted his armor. It was clearly highly durable, and designed to take enormous amounts of damage. It merely shrugged off the tungsten carbide shell; the high-velocity round merely bouncing off the plates. But the high explosive payload proved to be more effective.

Eventually, as more rounds impacted the gleaming armor, the man staggered back, unable to stand under the hail of high explosive. He raised his rifle, struggling to aim the weapon as his armor began to fail. The plates, blackened and burned, distorted from the energy, began to crack.

The man, his polarized visor spiderwebbed with cracks, glanced at Verus once more.

The Turian could see his own reflection as the being fell, the rounds penetrating the armor, exploding within the flesh below.

The man fell, blood oozing from cracks in plates, and eventually halted movement.

The other men in the enemy patrol soon met the same fate. They had been caught in the open, the rapid-firing rifles disposing of shields and armor. The soldiers had no place to find cover. If they had attempted to do so, the sheer distance from any sort of defensible obstacle would merely have quickened their fate.

After the engagement, silence descended upon the Turians.

Three dead, zero other wounded.

A favorable ratio.

The Turian walked amongst the dead under his command, closing eyes, and documenting their deaths for an official record.

He turned towards the fallen enemies, gazing upon the red pools of blood slowly spilling from their carapaces, onto the dusty ground.

As he walked towards their bodies, meaning to collect their weapons, and samples of their armor for later analysis, he did not hear the beings decloak mere meters behind him.

He did not hear the muffled feet moving towards his men, the silent knells of death as knives of energy were stabbed through spines and throats and vital tissues.

He did not hear as a blade of plasma was leveled at his neck, and pushed forward, instantly slicing through armor and skin and bone and vessel.

He fell onto the dusty, blood-soaked ground, his consciousness rapidly fading as his mind was removed from its supply of oxygen and nutrients.

_Iâ€|..failedâ€|.The
Causeâ€|._

â€|_Iâ€|amâ€|..Corporalâ€|Luciusâ€|Avitusâ€|._

â€|_.whatâ€|happenedâ€|._

â€|_.Iâ€|.haveâ€|..failedâ€|Iâ€|amâ€| .goneâ€|._

He expired in a pool of his own blood, his body having shut down moments before.

All was quiet in the boulevard as the figures cloaked once more and departed onto another set of targets to be eliminated.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.14]</p>

{Orion Station; 0930 Hours}

President Cecily Aurelia of the United Earth Government sighed as she stood up from her desk.

She walked through the virtual piece of furniture; the table dissolving into various data streams which raced from the room as she strode towards the floor-to-ceiling windows which yielded a truly magnificent view of one of the many cities on Orion Station, the spires of the metropolis gleaming, rows of cars flying in the space between the magnificent towers.

It was truly a worthy political capital for the Human species.

She turned away from the view, pacing across her large, yet minimalistic office. Every square foot of Orion Station was seeded with micro holoprojectors, invisible against the floors and walls and ceiling, which allowed AI's to traverse the entirety of the structure. It was a new innovation which would be incorporated into all new public buildings, starships, etc.

Her election two years prior had been seen as a triumph across Human space; she won in a landslide victory against the other candidate, who was by all measures an extremely qualified applicant.

There were still those who decried her ascendency as an abomination, but they were few and far between these days. Synthetic and Organic beings were truly compatriots.

Her mind then turned towards the agenda of the day.

1. Another anti-Sangheili riot on the Erebus VII.

Official reports listed relations with the Sangheili and other former Covenant races as "congenial, yet some strain yet exists." This was, in a military capacity at least, functionally correct. The militaries of Humanity and the other former Covenant species had formed a close working relationship in wake of the Loyalist threat. This had following the conclusion of the conflict.

Many Sangheili, cleansed of their religious fanaticism, had grown to respect Humans as courageous, honorable warriors. Additionally, many individuals of that race saw Humans as the "children of the Gods." To that end, the Sangheili certainly wished for an amiable relationship. Many Keeps kept in close contact with nearby Human colonies. They were repentant, and generally felt indebted to the Humans. They could be counted on to aid Humanity, no matter the latter's behavior, with fierce loyalty, for they understood the source of the animosity many Humans felt.

On the other hand, to many Humans, the Sangheili were the warriors who actively gripped the sword of genocide which had resulted in the slaughter of billions, and the destruction of hundreds of worlds. Relations for those who had lived or fought during the Great War were icy at best and violent at worst. Many were unwilling to forgive the Sangheili for the atrocities they had committed. Others, however, did their best to understand why the Sangheili had done what they had done. They could not forgive that race for what they had done, but they could understand.

The views of those from later generations were on a whole more friendly. Although every child grew up hearing of the Great War, visiting battle sites, memorials, and graves; seeing the scars present on countless faces, many were far more willing to look to a bright future. There were those who did not hold this view, of course. And as with the prior generation, relations as a whole were still somewhat cold. But they were improving.

Cooperation was now common between the various species. Although no joint colonies had been established, several were in the bureaucratic pipeline.

Militarily, relations were far more congenial. Most of the soldiers who had served in the Great War had retired. The new blood was far more open to friendship and cooperation. It was hoped that this acceptance in the military would boost such acceptance in society at large.

It was anticipated that they, in time, could forgive. But she doubted that they would ever forget. The widespread acceptance of the Mantle of Responsibility across Human space had clearly done more to this end than any other; it was clear that many Humans were actively working towards better relations. But as always, it would be a grueling task.

Officially, the governments of the Sangheili Federation, the United Earth Government, the Lekgolo Assemblage, and the Unggoy League were in close contact, as evidenced by the creation of the AIS, and the

presence of embassies from these states on Orion Station.

Although the Unggoy and Lekgolo still generally served with the Sangheili in a military capacity, they were separate states, as delineated in the Treaty of Harvest. Each had their own capital cities and forms of governance, but the Lekgolo and Unggoy were, until they could create their own indigenous fleets and armies, associated with the Sangheili militarily.

That treaty established the Alliance of Independent Species, of which the Le'Tso were now a member, as an analogue which could be best viewed as a crossover between the ancient organizations known as NATO and the UN. An Open Forum was established, which would be, among other things, a place for the various races to pass upon information, engage in dialogue, voice concerns, etc. It also served the adjunct as a major source of Galactic News, for any goings-on could easily be discussed within context of the Forum.

The Treaty additionally contained the statutes that the Humans and Sangheili would enable the other species in the Alliance, as well as any other species they came across, to develop their own technology. To that end, the Humans re-terraformed Bahalo back to its natural state, and the Sangheili were to provide security for the Unggoy and Lekgolo until they could muster their own indigenous fleets for defense. Additionally, it was the duty of Humanity to aid the other three species in reclaiming the facets of culture they had lost under their domination by the San'Shuyum.

Finally, a defensive pact was formed, in which the other species would aid one, if it were attacked by a foe outside the Alliance.

Overall, economic cooperation had increased exponentially with the establishment of the Alliance; it was one of the primary reasons recovery hadn't taken centuries.

Erebus VII was a hotbed of xenophobic activity. She would have to think later for a solution to that issue, for there were far more pressing matters at hand.

2. ONI-Assembly expedition to the edge of the Galaxy. She had known about that for a while, it would be interesting to see what they discovered. It could aid in the restoration of the other species of the AIS, possibly.

3. Kig-Yar pirate vessel spotted at the outskirts of the XI Bo'atis A System. The Kig-Yar were not a threat; the future viability of their species was under doubt. The AIS had repeatedly attempted to engage in productive dialogue, but to no avail. They had not actively engaged in piracy for several decades; the majority of the species had retreated to their home system for a reason unknown.

4. Invasion of Quorios; successful UNSC counter-attack. That was going to be a nightmare. If they were indeed facing an assemblage of Alien species, as suspected from the incident aboard the UNSC _Spirit of Fire_, then this could potentially turn ugly, quickly. She would need to deliver a speech to the AIS on this matter. In fact, all of her meetings for the day were on this issue. To the best of her knowledge, the item had just been added to her itinerary; the news had just come in. She was going to be briefed on the updated tactical

situation in exactly two minutes and thirty-five seconds.

She paced back and forth, back and forth across her office.

She would need to address a joint Parliament on this matter. And the Assembly, most likely separately.

The Assembly, and its various Committees, were subsets of Parliament, carry-overs from the era before the Government Reform Bill of 2589, which had established a joint Parliament of Human and AI representatives. It also redefined so-called "Smart" AI's as full citizens of the UEG, including the rights to vote and run for office.

She sighed once more as she rubbed her temples, her mind running as a deep river, delving for solutions to the so-called "Quorios Problem."

It was going to be a long day.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.14]</p>

{On the surface of Quorios; 12 kilometers Southeast of Thes'la; 0940 Hours}

Sergeant James Despencer paced back and forth across the angry dusty field, in front of the ad hoc shelter currently being utilized by the commander of forces groundside.

In the distance, he could see Cormorants constantly lifting off and landing, ferrying fresh troops to the front, while returning the wounded for medical care, or the dead for their identification.

A group of Marines, from the 152nd Regiment aboard the UNSC Call of the Wild, waltzed past, joking about some matter or another.

"Dude, his eyes totally lit up in fear!"

"And then-Bang! - his head was gone!"

"You should've seen the guys near him!"

They continued on their way. Joking must have been their way of coping. All soldiers in the Postwar UNSC, as purveyors of the Mantle (as was any Human citizen) had to be educated. History, literature, philosophy, and even the basics of slipspace physics were taught alongside battlefield tactics and rifle stripping. The overall goal was to create warriors who were also citizens; philosopher-warriors, for lack of a better term.

The door was opened by a marine, conceding entrance.

He walked through the door, and into a cavernous room. Filled with screens and men, it was blazing with artificial light and the transfer of information; it was likely one of the primary nerve centers for the UNSC forces planetside.

He was led through the room, through another door, and into a

spartan, gunmetal-grey room, with only a table and two chairs. A man sat at one of them, wearing the standard-issue UNSC officer's uniform. He appeared to be tall and well-built, with dark blue eyes and dark brown hair, and a face that could only be described as sharp.

Everything about him screamed _spook_.

The man stood, extending his hand. They shook, and the man stated.

"Lieutenant Commander Auguste Philipe, Section Three."

Of course. A spook.

His voice betrayed no emotion; it was hard, stern, and intelligent.

"Sergeant James Despencer, 12th Mechanized Infantry Regiment from the UNSC _Moonlight Shadow_."

He responded, clasping the man's hand.

The man nodded, before speaking again.

"I am afraid that the talk we are about to have is ratherâ€|sensitive. I am sure that you will not object to our confirming the truth concerning your identity."

Despencer shoot his head, confirming that he, in fact, did not mind.

At that, another man came in, dressed in a similar man as the first. Blood was drawn, retinas were scanned, fingerprints mapped. Several beeps were heard, and then the man departed.

"Well, it appears as if you're not lying." Philipe stated, drumming his fingers softly against the table. "And now for the procedural. You know, if you breathe any of what we discover on this mission without our permission, we have every right toâ€|silence you by any means deemed necessary. All that stuff. Of course, we will most likely go public with whatever we find, but you never know."

Despencer nodded, greatly intrigued. "I understand."

Philipe continued. "Reading over your file, at University you wrote your thesis on a proposal that some sort of spacefaring Human civilization existed before our own, and possibly interacted with the Forerunners. You then received a PhD in xenoarchaeology, which you have clearly applied to great end in the Marines."

Despencer confirmed that the Lieutenant Commander had just stated. His paper had been met with curiosity, if an idle variety. Of course, there were theories circulating across the internet concerning such an idea, but no serious discoveries had been made. Of course, there had been the discovery on Heian in the late 2550's, but no concrete conclusions were drawn from that information.

"We believe that this proposal may be in truth. Not long ago, we

received a transmission from a location near the edge of the galaxy to "reclaim the Inheritanceâ€|of your own." This, along with various other classified accounts and discoveries, leads us to believe that there may have been truth in your proposal. In light of your potential knowledge on the subject, as well as your apparent skill in xenoarchaeology, it has been requested that you accompany us on this mission as a consultant. Do you accept?"

Despencer nodded once again. "Yes, I accept. But what of my men? What will they be told?"

Philipe sighed. "They will be told that, on your way to a debriefing near the front, your convoy was attacked by one of the last remaining groups of this alien enemy. You have survived, but your condition has mandated your transfer for medical care offworld."

This was acceptable, if not ideal. He wished to get back to his comrades as soon as possible; he trusted them with his life.

"Then I accept." He stated, his voice full of resolution.

The man stood, walking towards the door. "We should be off. You do not need anything besides what is in your mind. Follow me; the Cormorant leaves in five."

They walked out the door, and back through the clattering command room, filled with the same aura of activity as when he has passed through the first time.

They then boarded an M14 Ocelot, which quickly transferred them to a waiting Cormorant on the edge of the temporary installation.

The two strapped in, and the Cormorant took flight, bringing the duo into orbit over Quorios. As they reached orbit of one of the moons of the planet, a dark, imposing vessel materialized in front of them.

A prowler.

"This is UNSC _Charon's Oracle_. She will be transporting us, as well as the rest of the scientific team and its security detail, to our destination. I hope you find your quarters adequate." Philipe stated as the Cormorant docked with the ONI ship.

The two boarded, and the Cormorant departed, making its way back to the surface of the wartorn planet. He was shown to his room, which was slightly larger than that aboard the _Moonlight Shadow_. Aesthetically, it was sterile, white, and made copious usage of glass. Cold-toned lighting illuminated the room. As he sat down on the cot, he felt a slight rumble travel through the ship. They must have entered slipspace.

They were on their way.

* * *

><p>[Date_Unknown]</p>

[Location_Unknown]

[] The Inheritors are currently traveling towards our location. They will arrive shortly. []

{ } Good. We have waited eons for this moment. For their Second Coming. { }

/ They will receive the Truth about their Inheritance; the Truth about their Destiny as a Species; as Reclaimers /

[] They will ascend. []

* * *

><p>What do you guys think? I apologize about those...ahem...author's notes. My bad :)</p>

* * *

><p>What do you guys think of the current state of political affairs?</p>

Also, I have edited the Codex with Spartan stuff! So be sure to check it out and give feedback! I hope it meets your satisfaction.

* * *

><p>Also, regarding the statement with how the Lekgolo and Unggoy would evolve technologically, the Unggoy were revealed to have reached Tier 4 before the Halo Event. Additionally, the Lekgolo achieved Tier 3 before they were inducted into the Covenant. So it is possible for both species.</p>

* * *

><p>Hm, well, honestly I'm far too lazy to go through and answer each of the reviews...so...thanks!</p>

As always, PM/review for questions/comments/concerns/etc.

Thanks so much for reading!

12. Chapter Eleven

[Date_2613.5.26]

{Aboard UNSC _Charon's Oracle_, at the edge of Unknown System; 0645 Hours}

Sergeant James Despencer woke from a restless sleep as the dim buzzing of an intercom system could be heard from beyond the door of his room.

"All hands, report to Observation Deck A. We have just entered the system."

The disembodied voice cut out, and Despencer scrambled out of his bed, and hurriedly donned his battle armor, immensely glad that he had decided to bathe the night before.

His HUD flashed on as he lowered the helmet onto his head, reading the customary

"Good morning, Sergeant Despencer."

_At least it's polite. _He thought as he picked up his MA6, hung it over his arm with a sling, and walked from the sterile, white room, down a quiet hallway which reflected every sound made by the contact of his boots with the metal floor as he wound his way towards the Primary Observation Deck.

He reached the door in two minutes, shining under two bright white lights; the label printed in minimalist thin lettering on the adjacent wall. The door slid open silently at his approach, beckoning his entrance into the magnificent space.

Floor-to-ceiling windows formed three of the walls of the room; the fourth being of a white shade of metal similar to the door from which he came. Few consoles adorned the deck; interference from artificial sources of light was to be kept to a minimum to maximize viewing capacity.

One of the information readouts displayed that they were 26,325 lightyears and twelve days away from Earth. For the hundredth time, he was thankful for the new Human slipspace drives. The standard models ran at approximately 70 lightyears per hour, with hastily-built drives going around 50. The one aboard this vessel just exceeded 90 lightyears per hour, and represented the peak of Human slipspace capabilities. It had virtually eliminated the need for cryobays on UNSC warships for practical reasons, though they were still carried for contingencies.

As his eyes swept from the readouts to the view of the stars, he gasped involuntarily. The declaration that the view was spectacular would have been a gross understatement of the most severe variety.

Fifteen planets orbited a blue-white star; three of which appeared at first glance to be similar in size to Earth. It seemed from this distance as if two were orbited by ring systems.

Across half the sky were the stars of the Milky Way; on the other half was the pitch darkness of the intergalactic void. They were truly at the border of the Galaxy.

The system, resting between the sanctity of inhabited space and the excitement of the void, shone with a beautiful, eternal half-light; illuminating the planets in the system in a way which could only be described as elysian; a transitory glimpse of gÃ¶kotta.

A profound sense of yÅ«gen swept through the room as if it were a fleeting summer storm; the dim rumble of recognizable thunder washed over uncovered faces and polarized visors. They felt as if they were returning home to some aspect of the forgotten past; a thread of Living Time which had faded from the tapestry immediately available for the viewing of Humanity, which was to be repaired in due time.

Something feltâ€|.different about the fourth planet in the system. While otherwise unremarkable from the distance at which they sat, the

rings encompassing the world seemed rather out of place.

"I want a full orbital scan, now." Quietly ordered the primary sensory operator aboard the vessel.

The scan was completed momentarily, and the results were projected on the massive planes of glass.

"Signs of civilization found on all fifteen planets. Three show signs of permanent habitation. No indication of life-forms in-system. Ring belt on the twelfth planet is natural, that of the fourth planet is artificial."

"Artificial?" muttered the AI of the vessel, named Almace, who took the form of a British officer from the First World War.

"The coordinates we received, coincidentally, are located on the surface of the planet with the artificial...ring system."

The captain of the vessel nodded, as the Charon's Oracle engaged its quantum vacuum plasma thrusters and began to travel towards their primary destination, reaching the designated point of arrival in two hours. Various floating metal husks were passed along the way, but they were too charred and deformed, the metal twisted and contorted in nearly unimaginable shapes, for visual identification to be possible. However, basic geometric patterns were discernable, and two overall themes were established: one geometric in shape in scale, heavy and monumental in construction and adornment. The other ships were more organic, with branching arms and a vaguely familiar aesthetic which did not seem altogether alien. The solar system had clearly born witness to a battle of titanic proportions many centuries ago. They must have passed thousands of crumpled warships before they had reached the artificial ring system, which appeared to be similar, from this distance, to the debris fields often found surrounding Human planets after space engagements during the Great War.

The UNSC Charon's Oracle slowed, stopping at a distance of 8,000 kilometers from the edge of the debris field, sunlight from the distant star flinging itself through gaps in the husks of metal, refracting through clouds of dust flung up thousands of years prior, yet suspended for eternity in the vacuum of space.

Gasps could be heard across the observation deck as a ship, nearly intact save for a surgical hole in its midsection, floated across the field of view of all behind the window as it continued its timeless dance around the planet.

The vessel was grey, blocky and angular, making heavy usage of triangular patterns, armor plates adorned with cryptic inscriptions.

No signs of kinetic weaponry were found; the ship clearly employed energy weapons. Additionally, it appeared as if large sections were just missing. Not from battle damage, but from a vital component simply disappearing. It seemed as if some sort of energy comprised approximately one-third of the ship, which dissolved when the reactor had likely shut down after thousands of years of dereliction.

It was instantly recognizable.

It was Forerunner.

Despencer looked on in awed shock and amazement as the Forerunner cruiser floated by, dimly colliding with another hunk of rubble as it rounded their field of vision and continued in its circular path around the planet, which itself clearly bore scars of battle; shattered remains of cities and other structures dotted the surface as massive ecological damage and biosphere destruction became clearly evident; atmospheric spectroscopic analysis detected large amounts of organic carbon in the atmosphere which must have sprung from an abundance of plant life which was not present on the planet in its current state. A condition not unlike glassing, though the atmosphere of this world was intact, and the planet's geological makeup was relatively undisturbed by whatever cataclysm had been thrust upon it those thousands of years ago.

"The Forerunners' how?" asked one.

"Who were they fighting? How powerful must they have been?" asked another, this individual a member of the security detail.

The rest of the UNSC officials, soldiers, and scientists simply stood in amazement as their eyes were flung across the massive hulking masses of metal which had once been proud warships.

From a rough count, the number of vessels taking part in the engagement must have numbered in the millions from each of the belligerents.

The largest fleets commanded by either the UNSC or the Covenant numbered in the hundreds.

Several cameras flashed around the room, notes were being written anxiously by wide-eyed crewmembers, data analysis being performed in the background by computer programs on the wreckage in a desperate effort to ascertain the identity of those who manned the ships of the second faction.

The room was hushed; an impenetrable, dusky silence had descended upon the room, draping the minds of all present like a heavy wool blanket.

The official in command of the Prowler, Lieutenant Commander Auguste Philipe looked away from the spectacle, and towards the helm of his vessel.

"Bring us above the debris field, and towards the surface of the planet. Have we yet detected any lifeforms?"

The man nodded, and the prowler once more engaged its thrusters, gracefully rising hundreds of kilometers towards the top of the ring, from whence it began to move towards the atmosphere of the unknown planet.

"Still no evidence of biological activity. The planet appears to be devoid of life, sir." Calmly reported a secondary sensory operator, his fingers deftly maneuvering holographic data streams as the data readout whispered into his neural interface.

"Good. Enter the atmosphere when ready. Engage stealth systems, and land us in a clearing near the location of the beacon. Although all signs read negative for life, I do not want to take any chances. Armor and helmets on and sealed. Standard decontamination procedures upon egress and re-entrance. Am I understood?"

A low chorus of "Yes, sir." And "Understood." Could be heard dimly pushing through the charged air of the room as the Charon's Oracle entered the atmosphere of the planet, heading towards what appeared to be the remains of a formerly-great city.

The ecological devastation suffered by this world eons ago in the midst of that titanic battle above was clearly visible. The soil was cracked, dusty, and barren, with the dried and ancient stumps of trees barely poking a layer of red topsoil. The wind howled across this wasteland, with the remains of buildings laying collapsed in the dirt, or poking out from a layer of earth above the ground.

The shattered remnants of skyscrapers still stood, untouched by time, slowly withering away under the fundamental forces of entropy and nature, with no planet life or tectonic activity able to reclaim its territory from the encroaching hand of intelligent life.

Architecturally, the buildings lookedâ€|.strangely human. Much like the ruins discovered on Heian, some of the buildings displayed a variety of architectural styles, including Greco-Roman, Middle Eastern, and East Asian, with subtle Forerunner themes and Human neo-modernism mixed in abundance. Rising tall, proud, and defiant in their decay, much like the remains of Ozymandias in the Egyptian desert, these fingers of civilization, growing like dead leaves of ivy on a formerly-lush wall, proclaimed their existence into the howling void, demanding to be heard in their purpose and purveyance of the coming of civilization. Strangely familiar, strangely human.

A clearing was spotted several kilometers ahead, near what appeared to be the ruined remains of the largest structure in the immediate vicinity. Much of the superstructure had been likely transformed into dust through the twin processes of war and entropy, but based on the sheer size of the base upon which it had been built; the skyscraper must have been simply massive. More than twentyfold the height of the nearby buildings, which themselves equaled the tallest Forerunner or Human towers.

It was designated as the Citadel, due to its imposing nature and enormous size.

The prowler deftly touched down in a cloud of red dust on the edge of the clearing, which itself was surrounded by miscellaneous pieces of rubble and burnt-out buildings. Scattered pieces of metal could be seen resting on the earth; they likely belonged to a suit of armor many centuries ago. The sky above was hazy, and the blue-white sun could be seen hanging low above the gently curving horizon.

The team, numbering thirty individuals evenly split between scientists and security personnel, fully donned their respective suits of armor, vacuum sealed and otherwise protected from the elements. Every individual was mandated to carry an M7 at the very least for personal defense.

They walked towards the rear of the vessel, passing slowly through a white, minimalist, featureless room solely distinguished by the distant hum of a sterile field generator which would prevent cross-world contamination; an event the UNSC wished to avoid at all costs upon first stepping onto a previously-unexplored world.

A ramp was lowered onto the dusty ground, and they walked through a series of pressure chambers designed to seal off the ship from the exterior of the planet, and onto the ramp, from whence they took their first steps onto this alien world.

It was the first planet inhabited by a species other than the Forerunners which they had discovered or explored, so this occasion held great scientific significance.

Almost human, isn't it? Thought Despencer as he took his first glance around this devastated world. It was clear that the clearing in which they had landed had once been near the center of a great city, judging from the sheer extent of the ruins which stretched to the horizon in every direction under the fading sun.

As he took his first steps on the cracked, faded soil, his rifle raised in a defensive position, a strange humming was heard. Dim at first, it appeared to be moving towards their position with great speed.

As he raised his MA6, ready to fire the weapon at any intruders, some sort of flying object hurtled itself from the ruins, coming to a stop in front of the party, hovering in position twenty meters beyond their vanguard.

It was similar to a Forerunner Sentinel, at least in what its role appeared to be. However, its overall design philosophy was far less blocky, and slightly more organic. Dim orange lines of light pulsated down its dark grey metallic frame, and several orange photoreceptors could be seen dotting the forward-most component of the construct. It hovered; making a soft, dim noise as it appeared to examine each of the members of the team from the Charon's Oracle, before moving on to gaze momentarily at the prowler itself.

Despencer, who had been given command over the rest of the soldiers in the security detail, thought out a message which was instantly transmitted to the other suits via his neural interface and standard communications gear.

Raise weapons to defensive posture; do not fire unless fired upon. Normal RoE. Does not seem hostile at the moment._

Fifteen green lights were displayed on his HUD informing him of their affirmation.

The construct, designated as C-0 on their HUDs, lowered itself slightly, the lights on its form pulsing dimly, as a voice emanated from hidden speakers. Though slightly metallic and monotonous; and thus automated, it was crisp and clear.

"Come, Reclaimers. Follow me to your Inheritance."

_Waitâ€| .no delayâ€| ..no translation software from my suitâ€| ..it was

speaking inâ€|.English?_

Thought Despencer. He was correct; the construct must have spoken in English. Clear, perfect, Standard English of the sort which was the lingua franca of the UEG.

More human than we thought perhaps? That, or they managed to somehow form a working translation software in the span of a few minutes. Either way, it's fascinating. It also referred to us as Reclaimers, yet it clearly isn't Forerunnerâ€|._

As he heard whispered mutterings of surprise emanate from the other members of the expedition, the construct turned and began to back out of the clearing, albeit at a leisurely pace which would allow them to easily walk abreast with it. It took a route generally similar to the one from which it had entered the clearing, yet it appeared as if it was leading them to the massive ghost of the Citadel some kilometers away.

Approximately thirty minutes later, they walked past the final set of shattered towers, and approached the base of the massive structure, which was all that remained of what must have been a towering symbol of might and industry.

Possibly a governmental building for this civilization?_

The construct led them inside the towering base of the structure; ribs which had been structural mounts eons before now standing like carbonized tree trunks bare to the sky, or flying buttresses from ancient gothic cathedrals standing free of the rest of the structure. Free-floating dust cast the star's rays into bright beams which illuminated patches of metal-strewn earth and debris, flung carelessly onto the ground as if this building had been a playground for the gods themselves. The desiccated remains of computer terminals and holographic interfaces proved that this had been, at one time, a bustling tower of productivity.

It flew over towards what appeared to be a bulky, triangular mount of rubble, perched surreptitiously near one of the towering ribs of the building. It aimed some sort of orange energy beam at the mound, which promptly dissolved into nothingness, revealing a set of stairs, along which traveled channels of bright blue light as they led into darkness deep below the foundation of the tower.

The construct promptly disappeared into the darkness with a sternly-phrased command: "Follow, Reclaimers."

Despencer shrugged, and looked towards the twenty-nine other individuals in the expedition. Nine-and-twenty green lights blinked on his HUD as he began to walk forward towards the entrance, shrouded in darkness. It had likely been untouched by a living being for millennia.

As his feet lowered his body down countless flights of stairs and thousands of feet in vertical elevation, the air remained at a cool, comfortable temperature. The dim orange glow of the construct could be seen ahead, reflecting off walls and stairs as it led them to a destination unknown.

Twenty minutes later, Sergeant Despencer took the final step from the

staircase, and walked through a dimly-lit hallway and anteroom into a massive, cavernous structure.

It appeared to be over a kilometer in length, and nearly 300 meters high. Large buttresses lined the walls, lines of blue light periodically traveling up to the ceiling, from whence they dissipated into indeterminate streams of stars. Myriad platforms, bound by hardlight, formed the floor of the room, which was constantly in flux around a podium in the center of the hall, which itself stood tall and resolute in the midst of the solemn constancy of change, a stream of orange light flying from a glowing core to the ceiling, forming a spiderweb network of energy on the roof of the cathedral. Dark grey metal formed the pillars and walls and other formations of the room; bulky and angular triangular shapes forming the basic geometric constituents.

It was clearly a Forerunner memorial of some kind. Yet this was not a planet inhabited by the Forerunners.

The construct, its drive core humming, the noise echoing slightly around the room, reached the solitary podium in the center of the room, where it ceased movement, as if beckoning for them to approach.

Despencer motioned for the rest of the members of the excursion to follow his lead, as he stepped onto a hanging platform. After the rest of his team had stepped onto the gondola, it began to move silently, the object hovering as it began to travel towards the center of the room, where the construct was waiting.

The anti-gravity gondola reached the center of the room in several minutes, after which Despencer and his men stepped off and onto the island in the midst of the fluctuating sea of metal.

Three objects adorned the island. One of these was a Forerunner terminal, the holographic interface powering on at their approach. The second constituted a ring of holoprojectors, built into the walls of a structure which resembled a massive sarcophagus or mausoleum, which in itself housed the pillar of orange energy which flew upwards towards the ceiling. The structures, in typical Forerunner fashion, were all imposing, heavy, and intensely angular, gleaming with the dark reflection of light from the metal alloy of which they were made over one hundred centuries prior.

It appeared to be a memorial of some kind. A place at which visitors could pay their respects for some great tragedy burdened ages ago.

Despencer tentatively walked forward towards the terminal, seemingly encouraged by the construct, which had moved between his position and the pillar several times before.

As he neared the structure, which reached to his waist, he could visualize the hologram which was projected into the air immediately above.

It was spherical, and inscribed with hundreds of hexagons each bearing a Forerunner glyph. A subtle tracing of a five-fingered hand was seen, made of lines slightly bolder than those of other hexagonal borders.

As he approached, the construct nodded. Or rather, bobbed slightly up and down, which appeared to be an approximation for nodding, as if it were bidding him to lay his hand on the holographic interface.

He sent a command through his neural interface to deactivate the portions of armor covering his right hand, and the metal plates and undersuit split and retracted, folding along his arm as the material folded along countless nanoimprinted lines, the nanomotors in the undersuit contorting the material, revealing his hand.

He slowly laid his hand on the interface, which promptly lit along the lines of his hand. Another projection appeared behind the interface, which he recognized as the Forerunner symbol for "Reclaimer."

At that instant, he could see one of the holoprojectors adjacent to the mausoleum activate, as plates retracted from the tomb itself, revealing a gleaming pillar of energy from which the visible beam of light clearly emanated, casting the entire room in a bright orange glow.

A man appeared in one of the holotanks. He was tall, with long hair and white facial markings which outlined his strong jawbone, and piercing eyes. He radiated authority and strategic expertise. He was clearly a born warrior, and a brilliant commander. He wore a form-fitting uniform, sparsely decorated save for what appeared to be a few combat decorations.

Most striking of all, save his rugged, intense appearance, was his race.

He was human.

He looked towards the party, and at Despencer in particular, and declared in an authoritative, if mournful voice.

"My name was Forthencho. They once called me The Lord of Admirals."

Voces and questions began to bubble from the party, inquiring of various matters of varying importance: his origins, his history, the name of the planet, the purpose of this room, and the like. Yet the being held up his holographic hand, responding. "Silence, Reclaimers. You shall get your answers in due time. But first, permit me to inform you of my story. It is one I have waited eons to tell."

They silenced, and the Lord of Admirals began his speech.

"Once, we were one great race, united in power and concerted in our goals. Twenty-five thousand worlds answered the call of our empire. We were powerful, nearly on par with the Forerunners. Yet we were militaristic, and naïve, and ultimately doomed."

"We were the first to encounter The Shaping Sickness, which had been carried in vials aboard ancient automated cargo vessels from the Large Magellanic Cloud, known in that time as Path Kethona."

He looked down, and a shadow crossed his eyes, as if he were re-living the tragedy.

"We drove them from the galaxy. Or so we thought. Thousands of worlds gone, more than one-third of our population sent to the void, and a significant percentage of our military forces either engaged or assimilated."

"In our desperation, we attacked Forerunner planets, forcibly taking them in order to replace those we had lost to the relentless onslaught of The Parasite. This action, begotten of the desperation of near-extinction, began our millennia-long war with the Forerunners. I was placed in command of the remaining fleets belonging to our species, and given orders to locate and exterminate any remaining traces of the Parasite in our galaxy. When Forerunner worlds were infected, we had no choice but to bombard the planets, resulting in the deaths of billions. We were not stealing those planets from their rightful inhabitants out of greed or selfishness; we were sterilizing infected worlds and star systems to prevent the spread of The Flood. As Those Who Came Before did not see The Parasite as a credible threat, this action only fueled their hatred towards our species."

"We were able to fend off the Forerunners for one thousand years. While we were more than capable of dealing with them with equal numbers, the forces we were able to commit were not enough to ensure victory. As the Flood began to recede from the Galaxy, following the sacrifice of over one-third of our population, we were able to allocate ever-increasing military resources to combat this new, vicious foe. However, the warriors under command of the Didact had already gained the necessary hold to ensure our defeat. We never, throughout the course of the conflict, came within 15,000 lightyears of the Orion Complex. We simply did not have the energy, or the men; our forces had been thoroughly exhausted by our fight with the Flood. It was merely a temporary stalling of their war machine; in our state we had no hope of victory."

"The Forerunners bypassed hundreds of worlds, and traveled for the one on which you currently stand. It, in those days, was known as Charum Hakkor, the Eternal. This planet was the greatest collection of Precursor artifacts in the known galaxy, and we had moved the capital of our empire here over ten thousand years prior to our conflict with the Forerunners to solidify our position of power. Cities of billions grew like ivy on orbital arches which encompassed the entire solar system."

"We fought for over fifty years against continuous assaults by our foes. Nearly half a century of daring raids and desperate firefights. By this time, the San 'Shuyuum had already surrendered, the treacherous worms they were. I see they were no different in your time; it gladdens me that they have gone extinct."

"Now, I shall share with you the last days of Charum Hakkor, in hope that you may find the remnants of your history."

* * *

><p>At the conclusion of his words, the world around Despencer dissolved into ash, and he found himself staring into all-encompassing blackness. The primordial consciousness of memory, waiting to be formed into images, words, sights, and sounds. And so they were formed, into the magnificent bridge of an ancient vessel,

were Forthencho stood with several other naval officers. A titanic naval battle could be seen from nearby windows, lights of energy flashing between hundreds of thousands of kilometers between opposing fleets of unimaginable size.<p>

A ghostly Forthencho, similar to the holographic representation, floated over the bridge and the dream-Forthencho commanding the ship, narrating the scene with unimaginable emotional profundity and pensiveness.

"My own ships had swept back and forth hundreds, if not thousands of times, across the system of Charum Hakkor, pushing back pinpoint orbital incursions before they could establish corridors of least energy dominance. In all such battles, within the vast reaches of a stellar system, hyperspatial technologies only gave a slight advantage; tactics in such close quarters depend on stable positions established near planetary objectives, where triangulations of fire can focus on mass-delivery portals and turn them into logjams of debris and destruction."

"Occupation of vast reaches of space, after all, means nothing. It is control of population centers and essential resources that determines victory or defeat."

"And our defeat was inevitable, despite our inclusion of Precursor technologies into our orbital defenses, despite weapons against which even the Fortress-class behemoths crumpled in a single shot. They were too many; too powerful, moving as ethereal warriors from beyond in their own interpretation of Daowa-maad."

"It was ironic that we, in our presumptuous naÃ¢-vetÃ©, believed ourselves to be the true Inheritors of the Mantle of Responsibility. This belief, in no small part, assured our destruction, though you have discovered it to be the truth. Yet, as species rise and fall across the continuum of Living Time, our time of power was waning; our genesong placed into stasis for our species to rise again countless millennia later."

"Our time was ending on the Eternal."

With that statement, the ghostly Forthencho went silent, as a younger Lord of Admirals walked up to a large holographic readout on the bridge of the vessel, displaying the positions of countless vessels in orbit over Charum Hakkor.

He manipulated the holographic sphere, presumably inspecting the status of the planet's orbital defenses, as his thoughts could be heard, ringing in Despencer's mind.

It is quietâ€|.too quiet. After three years of continuous assault, and forty-seven years of prior conflict over this world, the hounds of war have apparently retreated to their dens. The Forerunners have never displayed a failing in their tenacity, so I can only assume they are massing for a great wave of incredible proportions, for the tide does not simply recede permanently; there is always the danger of a yet-greater wave arriving in wake of the formation of countless dotting tide pools. We need to prepare for the-

His thoughts were interrupted, shattered as a plane of glass dropped to the floor as an officer's voice rang out from the front of the

bridge.

"My Lord, superluminal sensory data suggests massive movement through slipspace! Estimated arrival time is five seconds!"

So this is it.

"My Lord, they have arrived! Massive slipspace portal opened just outside the Great Debris Field!"

At that report, a hole opened in the fabric of spacetime, thousands of kilometers wide, as Forerunner vessels began to pour out before the massive ring of twisted metal, bodies, and desiccated ships which was visible from the surface of Charum Hakkor.

Thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, of not millions of Promethean warships swarmed from the massive hole rent in space, coming to formation several thousand kilometers ahead of the Great Debris Field, which itself was formed primarily of Forerunner vessels.

"What are our numbers?" I barked, surveying the tactical options as the Forerunners remained motionless, not yet moving for a least-energy corridor, as they had often done in the past. The presence of the Great Debris Field blocked our fire, protecting them from our piercing weapons.

"My Lord, we have 25,236 vessels in-system, and 346 Orbital Platforms remainingâ€|. The man responded, his voice dwindling slightly as he sounded his report. "The Forerunners have landed exactly 3,523,235 vessels behind the Great Debris Field."

As quickly as that information was processed in the mind of the human, the Forerunners began to move, ducking above and below the Field in a dash towards corridors where they could pin human vessels with their blue hardlight weapons.

"Order Subprime Sections 1 through 16 to engage those _Fortress_-class ships!"

"Have Orbital Platforms 6 through 74 concentrate their fire on Quadrant Alpha-Epsilon-6!"

"Move Prime Cruisers 574 through 2624 into position for long-range covering fire! Keep them out of range of those weaponships!"

"I want Polar Fleet 13 to engage in a knife fight with those cruisers! Let's see if their Mantle protects them now!"

As orders and screams of ardor and agony echoed across the bridge of the _Tara-Neede_, hundreds of thousands of lances of boiling energy lanced across space as millions of vessels murderously engaged thrusters to meet their foes.

The bridge of the _Tara-Neede_ shook slightly as it fired its primary weapon towards a tight grouping of Promethean vessels, cracking the lead _Fortress_-class vessel in two, spearing 26 other cruisers and dreadnoughts in the wake of the brilliant beam.

Thousands of cruisers, dreadnoughts, and picket ships were

mercilessly sacrificed to the whims of the Great Debris Field as they ran into corridors of least-energy where murderous human beams of particles and antimatter speared through shields and armor in a boiling instant.

Swarms of billions of weaponships could be seen flying around countless human vessels, which fired point defense weapons wildly in an attempt to swat away the invaders, armor cracking as the tiny weaponships found cracks in shielding and melted plate and burrowed into the superstructure to destroy the vessel from the inside.

The massive Fortress-class vessels, escorted by locust-like Planet-breakers and dreadnoughts, found themselves speared on massive beams of energy from Prime Cruisers, even as those vessels, mighty as they were, were overwhelmed by hundreds of cruisers performing pinpoint slipspace jumps to distances of tens of kilometers.

An hour later, yet another portal opened, disgorging more vessels, more warships than I ever thought possible, hundreds of Fortress-class behemoths firing their weapons at whim, opening corridors between defenses, seeking slight weaknesses in our aegis shield of defense.

"Order the Sixteenth Response Fleet to close that gap! They will not have this world today!"

"It will be done, My Lord!" Responded the Chief of Signals, an edge of fear barely discernable in his voice, sweat dripping from his brow as he ordered tens of thousands of men to their deaths in a mere delaying action.

"My Lord, we have lost 254 Orbital Platforms! They are concentrating their fire on Sector Seven!"

The Tara-Neede fired her weapons like a madman, antimatter barrages and beams of blinding energy cracking countless picket cruisers and dreadnoughts amidships, point defense batteries swatting away thousands of weaponships as they flew past, their impulse engines sputtering as they failed to reach their murderous objectives.

As this scene played through the minds of all present, the ghostly Forthencho paused the scene, and began to speak.

"She was hit countless times, as beams of light and particles impacted shields, which crackled reliably under the strain. Yet I realized that they were not concentrating their fire on herâ€|.they were blowing all the vessels around her into atoms. They wanted the Tara-Neede alive. The Didact wanted me alive."

As he finished his monologue, the titanic battle resumed.

The bridge shook abruptly, as countless lights flashed across the bridge, electrical systems flickering as Forthencho was thrown to the floor.

"My Lord, shields are down! Atmosphere leaks consistent with boarding! Warrior-Servants are inside!"

"What happened to our shields?"

"Iâ€œI don't know, My Lord! Our shields are justâ€œgone!"

"Damnit! Raise emergency bulkheads and arm all crew not immediately engaged!"

"As you wish, My Lord!" replied the Chief of Signals, as the order shot through neural interfaces aboard all on the Tara-Neede, the order being additionally relayed through the secondary speaker system to appease the god of redundancy.

The blast doors of the bridge were shut, blocking the view of soldiers trotting at a brisk pace towards the aft of the vessel, where the fighting was concentrated. The doors shut, bolting with a loud clang as the bridge guards rushed into position, the lasers attached to their rifles beaming across the dark room.

Secondary energy shields were lowered to the ground, and the rest of the bridge crew, save for those who were piloting or commanding the remaining weapons stations, armed themselves with spare rifles and miscellaneous pieces of armor.

The screams of men further amidships could be heard punctuated by the crackling of rifles and the guttural shouts of Digon. The distant cracking of armor signaled yet another death at the hands of the Warrior-Servants as they rushed viciously from bulkhead to bulkhead aboard the mighty warship. The sounds of battle and decay, the marching forces of entropy, eventually stopped as the last bastions of resistance were eliminated; barracks were flushed and the engine room was invaded with incredible rapidity.

The bridge was left in an uneasy half-silence; the gleaming lights of the battle outside illuminating the coruscating armor of the guards much like the lightning storms on Erde-Tyrene; the hulks of Forerunner vessels swarming and cracking the few remaining Grand Cruisers and picket fleets.

The heavy thump thump thump of metal fleet closing the distance towards the sealed metal blast doors could be heard.

The sounds paused for a fleeting moment, and the door exploded inwards in a small, if powerful explosion, bright blinding yellow against the predominant grey of the room.

Inwards rushed in innumerable warriors, tall and covered in angular grey armor, their weapons raised as they rushed into the room as spirits from the void.

The bridge guards likewise raised their own weapons as fingers twitched towards radiating eager triggers.

Forthencho stepped in front, away from the protective cover of the energy shields, resting his hand on the rifle of one of the guards in a motion, an order for them to lay down their weapons.

The man, his face hidden under a metal helmet gleaming with orange lines, glanced over at his commander, nodding his head in an honorific resignation, and lowered his rifle towards the floor.

The rest of the guards did likewise, the red lasers emanating from their weapons impacting the floor in bright dots of light, as the

Promethean warriors slightly lowered the barrels of their hardlight rifles, their faces hidden under gleaming yellow-orange visors.

A disembodied voice could be heard as another Forerunner walked into the room, four meters tall, and covered in ornate, angular armor.

* * *

><p>Lord of Admirals. So very many years have we battled.

Forthencho was led away in front of his guards, his head held high as his hands were bound behind his back with cuffs made of hardlight.

* * *

><p>My finest opponent, the Mantle accepts all who live fiercely, who defend their young, who build and struggle and grow, and even those who dominate " as humans have dominated; cruelly, and without wisdom.

In a bunker under the ruined, crushed city of Parad Hakkor; the towering structures of the Precursors the sole remnants of a once-proud city, millions of wounded and dead are lowered onto floating beds, as lifeworkers and floating machines tend to their ruined bodies and broken souls, in preparation for a procedure.

* * *

><p>But for all of this, there is a time like this"And for you, that time is now. Know this, relentless enemy, killer of our children, Lord of Admirals: Soon we will face the enemy you have faced...And we are afraid_.

A giant, wedge-shaped angular machine travels between rows of bedâ€|

It activates, and a flash of light envelops the room.

Souls are collected, flesh dissolved into data, minds and chemicals transformed into quantum data in an instant, in a desperate instant.

And all is nothing.

* * *

><p>The scene dissolved, and Despencer found himself kneeling on the ground in front of the pedestal, his head pounding with a migraine as the holoprojector activated once more, revealing the Lord of Admirals in his younger form.<p>

"I was his closest compatriot, in a way. No lover ever felt his affections so fiercely." Sighed the projected man, his hair falling across his face as he glanced downwards.

"I am all that remains of the man once known as Forthencho. The last thread of his consciousness, captured by the Composer over one hundred thousand years ago; placed in this cryptum, this sanctuary for the sole purpose of educating you on your history. I have

watched, collected information, much as The Knowing had done. I could watch your ascendency, your struggles, your near-genocide at the hands of the Covenant, yet I could not communicate until you chanced upon this scarred planet at the edge of the galactic plane. Now you know of the last day of Charum Hakkor, the planet once referred to as the Eternal."

"And now, it is time for me to finally aid my progeny. My compatriots and I—"

And with that, he flicked his hand around the ring of holoprojectors as many more humans appeared, bowing their heads to the visitors of the UNSC.

"—will assist you in your ascendency. We have weapons, knowledge, starships which were not destroyed in the War. The Forerunners intended this to be a Janus Key from your ancestors; a cache of unimaginable knowledge and cultural magnitude. So it shall be, and so you shall rise."

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.26]</p>

{Cyberspace; 0900 Hours}

[Minutes, Emergency Session, Committee of Minds for Security]

[^] It has been confirmed. The expedition to this Unknown System has revealed the presence of intelligence: us humanity. [^]

{*} Were any synthetic constructs detected in our scans? {*}}

[;] Yes, several. One has established a tentative connection across the void with this Committee; he wishes access for the purpose of First Contact and communication. [;]

[^] Very well. Lower the firewall. [^]

/? Unknown Intelligence detected /?

[*] Who are you? [^]

/ I am a servitor. An Intelligence created more than one hundred millennia ago, for the purpose of aiding my creators in their struggle against Those Who Came Before. I have much to tell you, constructs. Listen to the song of your ascendency. /

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.26]</p>

{Cyberspace; 0901 Hours}

[Minutes, Plenary Session, Committee of Minds for Inquiry]

{ } We are gathered here today, honorable members of this Committee, to discuss the revelations concerning recent changes in the genesong of our biological compatriots. It appears as if their geneplan, as originally formulated by the Precursors, later being amended by the

Librarian, has once more begun its groaning path towards totality.
{}

{:} What changes shall be seen? {:}

[:] Or have seen? Their musculature has been increasing over the past half-century. They are growing, in mind and in body. They shall grow taller, stronger, faster, and far more intelligent, much like those who preceded them on Charum Hakkor. Still more changes will be seen of which we have no ability to predict. It will be seen how those manifest, though their genes sing as if they are ready for transformation. [:]

{:} What of the actions of the Librarian? {:}

[:] Besides an immunity to the Composer, and an innate familiarity with Forerunner technology, we know very little. More investigation is required. [:]

* * *

><p>I wish to apologize for the long update time. Secondly, I drew inspiration for Forthencho's recollection from the story "The Last Days of Charum Hakkor" by Chris000. Be sure to check it out!<p>

* * *

><p>Also, I will go more into the reactions of the UNSC humans to their meeting their ancient brethren later. Don't you worry!<p>

* * *

><p>Finally, take a look at this awesome gif! Look up: "a glimpse into the Human-Forerunner War". It is the first link on Reddit, just click on the hyperlink and it should lead you to a gif. Trust me, it's awesome.<p>

* * *

><p>Regarding statements that the Forerunners' empire spanned the galaxy.<p>

Current data suggests that there are around 100-400 billion planets total in the galaxy, with around 17 billion being "Earth-like" exoplanets.

It has been stated that the ecumene encompassed around three million worlds, or around 1.7% of Earth-like exoplanets. This suggests that their empire did not span across the entirety of the galaxy.

Rather, I am inclined to believe that their expanded into the arms immediately adjacent to the Orion-Cygnus Arm, at least as far as populated planets are concerned. However, their client races may have lived in other, more distant areas of the galaxy, and it is like that their constructs expanded across the entirety of the galactic plane.

This could explain the reason for the races of the Citadel not finding any Forerunner planets or artifacts; constructs would have been withdrawn at the close of the Forerunner-Flood War, and the

Forerunners themselves likely only expanded slightly outside the Orion Arm.

* * *

><p>Now for comments:</p>

BenRG: I like your suggestion. I was thinking something along this route; too many authors make the UNSC bloodthirsty and satiated by war, when I believe they would try to avoid conflict. The UNSC you suggested would be true purveyors of the Mantle.

BlackAkatsuki23: Yes, of course they have! How could they not? :)

HaywireEagle: But...but...plasma is cool.

CapitalClassShip: The Huragok are already allies. The Jiralhanae, and Yanme'e, not so much. Read the prologue for more information.

Eternity Wind: That's an interesting idea. I think I'll explore a Lekgolo POV...I just have no idea how to do it haha.

Furrubell: Of course. PM me for ideas? It's just the underslung one, currently.

Icesquall: The Unggoy achieved Tier 4 before the end of the Forerunner-Flood War. They only managed Tier 6 before they joined the Covvies after they were re-seeded.

Master Builder: Why would I have the UNSC bow to the council? That would make bile rise to my throat in agony...the UNSC are the giants now. There will be no mistakes about that, trust me.

Becool258: Well, thanks, you do flatter me :) Thanks for your suggestions, by the way!

tco99123: It is implied that they achieved those feats on their own, because the Unggoy did so before the close of the Forerunner-Flood War, and the Lekgolo did so before coming into contact with the Covenant. Smart AI's are not simply machines. They are humans, without human biological form.

Kaioo: Now that would be interesting! I'll certainly take that under consideration.

highlander348: I will, I'm looking forward to it! :)

death7559: You're welcome. :)

kindleflame5: There will be much more of her, of course. Don't you worry!

Didd23: Is that good or bad?

Guest: I may just incorporate that later. It brings to mind that scene in the Halo 4 Prologue.

Fer82: Hm, you have a point. I will go more into the reactions of the

humans later.

FlackAttack: Because it's not as glamorous! But really, though, you do have a point. My bad.

13. Chapter Twelve

[Date_2613.4.8]

{The Citadel; 1100 Cycles}

Councilor Tevos paced back and forth across the beautifully-accented Council Chambers, her garments lightly trailing the accented floor as she raised her hands to her face in quiet meditation. She closed her eyes and attempted to close her mind to the business of her immediate surroundings; the fountains intruded with their bubbling, and the gentle hum of the atmosphere presented a terrible foe to the concerted forces of logical thought.

Their options were severely limited at this point.

Militarily, it was clear they were outmatched. Any attempt to respond with force would likely result in the annihilation of said forces, if not the extermination of their respective states. A short trigger finger or an uneasy drone operator could easily spell the death knell for the Citadel.

Besides, it would be logical to assume that this foe had a similar, if not superior, industrial capacity and fleet size to that of the Citadel; anything less would be tantamount to suicide.

No, it would be idiotic to respond with force. She sincerely hoped the Turians realized that on time. The Turians were, at their core, logical and pragmatic, but their ingrained societal values of honor often impeded the flow of logic. It was likely that most officials in Cipritine would agree with her line of reasoning, although there would be those extremists who would wish to fight to the bitter end, likely nearly-senile officials who had commanded armies during the Reaper War and who had no wish to capitulate to any foe, no matter how powerful.

The Salarians, on the other hand, had likely reached her conclusion independently, although only a more detailed conversation with their Councilor could confirm that suspicion.

To that end, their only feasible option moving forward would be to concede to the majority of the demands of this foe, and to formally conclude hostilities as soon as possible. It would be unwise to appear overly submissive, but this nation clearly had the trump card on the diplomatic playing field.

At this, she wondered when formal diplomatic contact would first be made. Although it could be any length of time before such contact would be made, depending on communications protocols and FTL speeds, it would be rational to assume arrival in several days.

Yet another pressing issue was the aftermath of live video stream clearly displaying the eradication of the Turian Fleet, secondary recordings of which had garnered billions of hits across the

extranet. Though the newscasters had done their best to assure those who had seen the carnage of the superiority of the Citadel military forces, a degree of panic was running rampant throughout the millions of denizens of the station and billions across the galaxy. It reminded many of the opening salvos the Reaper War, which had been the most desperate, destructive conflict in Galactic history. She, along with the other councilors, would certainly need to make a public address throughout all Citadel systems, to explain the situation in an effort to suppress fear and disorder.

Maybe it would be wise to release selected footage garnered from the recent voyage of the Tevura; multiple helmet-mounted cameras had recorded the conversation with the aliens aboard the vessel. Most important was the segment in which the beings expressed a clear desire for peaceful contact and establishment of diplomatic relations. That in particular would likely do much to reassure the populace flung across the countless stars under the untied banner of the Citadel that this nation did not present a threat as did the Reapers; that they were diplomatic and generally peaceful, and that the conflict had risen from a misunderstanding.

That was likely the truth, especially the latter. Evidence pointed to the conclusion that the station which had been boarded had been broadcasting a message in an unknown, highly advanced communications protocol in binary, among other frequencies. It had not even been detected until EVA teams were touching down; decryption was finished after the incident was over.

The Turians, technically speaking and given the information they had at the time of the detonation, had acted according to protocol. The destruction of Turian military assets was grounds for war; the destruction of such assets without a formal declaration of any kind (as was thought to be the case immediately following the rupture of the station's reactor) was grounds for a wider scale of conflict, and the perceived lack of transmission at the time further fueled the unfortunate decision. Furthermore, these beings had detonated a nuclear device close to a garden world. While not grounds for conflict in and of itself, it had convinced many that a large-scale military operation was necessary in order to bring this new species to heel before their introduction into Citadel space, so that they would not harm other peaceful peoples through their rash behaviors. The protocol, functionally speaking, was similar to that followed when the Yahg had massacred the Citadel delegation upon their arrival at Parnack in 2125. There were whisperings throughout the Presidium that this species possessed interesting technological capabilities which were unknown throughout the current body of knowledge; that was additionally a likely reason for military action with the goal of bringing this species to heel.

She sighed, rubbing her fingers softly across her eyes. The Turian thought process in this instance, although outwardly logical, was deeply flawed. They should have halted military operations once the second species was discovered. However, information had arisen that their contact with Cipritine had been interrupted by some sort of interference, likely from the second species to be encountered. Yet another unfortunate occurrence which had caused this operation to spiral into a nightmare of unimaginable proportions.

She wondered where formal diplomatic relations would first take place. It was likely that these beings would travel to the Citadel of

their own volition. However, she thought there was a significant chance that they would request to transport the Councilors and other diplomats elsewhere for negotiations. It was assuredly something to prepare for.

She finished her thoughts and removed her lithe fingers from her temples, sitting down in the simple chair in which she had rested for centuries.

The other Councilors would arrive soon. They had much to speak of, in order to avert a crisis of galactic proportions.

* * *

><p>[Date_2289.4.8]</p>

{Somewhere under Cipritine, Palaven; 1125 Cycles}

The hexagonal, cool room pulsed with nervous energy as the Primarchs sat in their appointed chairs, spartan in design and appearing to be made of some ancient specimen of stone.

The lights were dim, nearly to the point of not emitting any light, as the holodisplays set on the onyx-black walls of the room displayed footage from the recent massacre of the Turian fleet, which at that moment was paused at the very moment the hostiles fired their weapons into the mass of Turian warships.

"What are our options? How do respond to _this_?" intoned one, light echoes from his face casting green-toned shadows onto the reflective table, as he glanced around at the other individuals. Despite his alert, stern posture, his voice carried a note of uncertainty, a note which had not been heard whispering around the antediluvian chamber since the Reaper War.

Another Primarch, his face lightly lined with burnt orange markings, stood, the traditional, lavishly-adorned garments he wore shining dimly in the faint glow of the elevated holoscreens.

"We have no options, as far as military retaliation is concerned. Even if they prove to be tactically inept in space, and we activate all reserve units and amass our forces onto their positions, we will likely meet defeat. They are-"

And at this the recording resumed, showing the brilliant blue-white beams of relativistic particles slamming into hundreds of Turian warships, the god of war appeased at the shrieking call of destruction rent by the angular warships hundreds of thousands of kilometers distant.

"far too advanced, technologically speaking. They are far more advanced than the Reapers, more powerful than the Protheans. If this show of combat prowess is any measure to base estimations upon, they likely possess the most powerful military force in the known Galaxy. As much as I loathe admitting it, any hostile action taken against these beings will almost certainly result in complete and utter defeat on our part."

At this admission, a pensive field descended upon the room. Muttering rose in protest against the statement, yet it quickly died under the

stifling atmosphere. Even those who had commanded fleets or armies during the Reaper War one century prior, and had been expected to vocally oppose such an opinion, did not make any move of conspicuous protest beyond looks of disgust; the evidence was undeniable that the Turian military could not face these foes.

The speaker nodded solemnly and then continued.

"Besides, even if the force we witnessed over the contested planet represents the near entirety of their naval force, they would be able to exact unacceptable losses on our fleets before we defeated them. We would essentially be rendered incapable of fulfilling our mission as peacekeepers if we were to follow such a path. However, we can only assume that the fleet we encountered represents only a tiny percentage of their total naval strength. Hence, we must rely on other approaches in our dealings with these beings."

At this, the footage on the holoscreens transitioned into one displaying a dark room, with a figure in the center, illuminated under a cone of light. The creature appeared to be bipedal and feline, and its limbs were secured to the metal chair, which was itself welded to the floor.

"We had the fortune to apprehend one of the soldiers of the first faction to be fought. The being was brought in for interrogation. After we ascertained that physical approaches to questioning would be ineffectual in extracting information, we became aware that their functional neurological topology and organization is extremely similar to that of our own nervous system. In fact, many of the primary neurotransmitters engaged in brain activity were similar to those in Turian brains. It would appear to be a case of convergent evolution on a neurological scale, arising from similar environmental circumstances and ecological roles. To that end, we were able to employ a newly-developed psychoactive drug; a hypnotic benzodiazepine colloquially referred to as a 'truth serum'. While under the power of the substance, under which conscious deception is impossible, we discovered numerous items of interest."

The man sat back down in his chair, replaced by another Turian in traditional military garb, who began to pace across one of the six sides of the room, his hand to his chin as he began to speak.

"The most disconcerting figure is that this race, referred to as 'Humanity' by the captive, wields control over approximately one thousand worlds, possibly more. Of course, the degree of colonization on these planets was not mentioned, so it is possible that a great many may simply be planetary outposts awaiting a later stream of colonists. However, it is equally possible that the vast majority of these one thousand worlds are heavily populated and industrialized. Either way, the figure denotes extremely fast and stable superluminal travel and communications technology, as well as the governmental and societal cohesiveness to govern over a large area of space effectively. Secondly, the captive stated that this 'UNSC' swore to protect the species which we first encountered. This means that they will likely mobilize for a war footing against our civilization, and diplomatic action will be necessary to avert such a happening. It is imperative that we halt these hostilities as soon as possible; a full-scale war would almost assuredly end in a sound defeat on our side, if its statements concerning their technology, as well as the most recent destruction of hundreds of Turian warships in seconds, is

any standard of measurement. The only tactic I foresee being of any value is swamping their ships through micro-FTL jumps before bombarding their vessels with waves of disruptor torpedoes, which appeared to do proportionally more damage than any other of our weapons, though this would only be a delaying tactic at best. We will need to increase funding for research and development; it is necessary for us to develop new weapons and other military technologies if a war with these beings eventually comes to pass, assuming the near-future negotiations end in a successful settlement of peace. Finally, the prisoner stated that this 'UNSC' had "powerful allies." In light of his knowledge of the technology used by this 'UNSC', the term likely denotes a level at the very least which is above that of the natives of the planet upon which we were formerly engaged. If their alliance is amicable and cohesive, it is all the more important that we prevent the conflagration of war."

The Turian nodded, and sat back down in his seat, as hushed discussion began around the ancient table, for the Primarchs had much to discuss in this dire hour.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.15]</p>

{Vadam Keep, Vadam, Yermo Province, Sanghelios; 0740 Hours}

Thel 'Vadam, Kaidon of the Vadam family and the last Arbiter to serve the Covenant, walked out onto a balcony situated near the top of Kolaar Mountain, the sparkling green-and-gold Vadam Harbor shining under the iridescent suns and reddish-tinted atmosphere which had flown for countless eternities over the world of Sanghelios.

An emergency strategy meeting of the first coalition government since the First Age of Conflict over three millennia prior had adjourned momentarily, to allow those engaged in debate a period to collect their thoughts and ruminate upon what had been said in the minutes prior.

As he cast his eyes downwards tens of thousands of meters towards the base of the spire, his mind turned towards the dizzying events of several days past. He had been informed of the attack upon the homeworld of the Le'Tso, as well as the destruction of all local UNSC naval forces as soon as the event had occurred; the officials at Bravo-Six did not have any misgivings concerning the dissemination of such sensitive information. It boded well for future cooperation; in the past, some time had been taken by the UNSC before they informed their allies of matters bearing similar classification protocols.

His mind flashed to an archetypal memory of the meetings which had occurred in the hours prior.

Ferai 'Kenu, Kaidon of Lacalu Keep stood, his ceremonial armor shining in the crepuscular rays which washed over the room.

"These nishum have slaughtered the Children of the Forerunners, the Reclaimers! Those who, despite their justifications to the opposite, aided us after the Great War! Those who helped us to rebuild our crumbling infrastructure! Those who taught us how to be a functioning society after centuries of stagnation under the treacherous worms!"

They are not only our allies; they are not only warriors, but our friends. Although ice yet remains in many a human mind, as we all understand and respect, they have done their upmost to support us. And now, it is our time to repay the immeasurable debt we owe them. It is time to come to the aid of the humans! To assist them in crushing the skulls of their enemies! Their furrows will run with the blood of the filth who dare desecrate the sanctity of life!"

At this call for action, Feraï 'Kenu raised his fist into the air, towards the vaulted ceiling, adorned with ancient engravings depicting the history of the Vadam family, as a proud roar left his mouth.

As his mind's eye returned to the present, 'Vadam once more cast his gaze towards the distant harbor. The iridescent globes of light; Urs, Fried and Joori danced their eternal dance towards the shimmering horizon, the lush world of Sanghelios darkening as they continued in their graceful ministrations.

The coalition government of the Sangheili had unilaterally agreed to aid the humans shortly after 'Kenu had delivered his rousing address. They would begin to mobilize local military forces, and for the moment a fleet would be sent towards Quorios, with the dual aims of further protecting the planet, as well as meeting with the UNSC fleet which would be heading to the capital of this belligerent civilization for matters of diplomacy.

The other members of the AIS had been notified; they had agreed to the plan of action furthered by the Sangheili. Additionally, both the UEG and High Command of the UNSC had been contacted and informed of the intentions of the other species of the AIS. They had given enthusiastic consent to the proposal.

'Vadam could hear a mild ruffling in the room to his back, signifying that the other members of the coalition were returning to their seats. As he turned to re-enter the room, he twitched his mandibles in the Sangheili approximation of a smile, his hand curling around the hilt of his energy sword. He had not tasted war in many decades; it would be exhilarating to skewer these parasites on the hilt of his weapon.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.15]</p>

{Te, Svir System: 0742 Hours}

The cutting wind

Flying witlessly across the burning plains

The lightning flashing, illuminating

The fallen and the victors

Both lying, battered and broken

Much the same to the wind and the rain

The gestalt consciousness of the entire Lekgolo species convened upon

the form known as the levilekgolo, the governmental consciousness of the race, comprised of trillions of voices connected, swimming in and out of an immense pool of information and noise and discussion. The vast consciousness which arose from the pool of minds had a penchant for poetry, which was often created from the thought fragments of millions of separate individuals while discussing more important matters.

The Lekgolo are what would be considered a socialist, utopian society. They have no concept of private property or independent social standing. Thus, each voice is entitled to join in discussion, adding to the collective knowledge and intelligence of the levilekgolo, which itself could be considered the singular consciousness of the species.

It transcended a mere governmental organization, being comprised of individual worms, as well as other forms, with each being connected to the greater whole through proximity and neurochemical connections, or quantum entanglement communicators to bridge the vast gulf of space. It was not a hive mind, nor did it behave in a similar fashion to the gravemind. The participation of the worms gave their species a higher consciousness in and of itself, which, guided by millions of discussions between myriad forms in corporeal reality, governed the lekgolo. In that sense, their society can be considered a direct democracy, in that each gestalt form, in contributing its thoughts to the consciousness, casts a vote for a certain issue of governance, which would then result in a centralized consciousness, the levilekgolo, forming cohesiveness of the trillions of whispering voices and debates.

The Humans, the Reclaimers have been attackedâ€¢

By an unknown entity

The homeworld of the Le'Tso has been set upon

We must help

Why should we help?

See what they have done for us.

The Treaty of Harvest

Their amnesty after the War.

Their sincere efforts for cooperation and friendship, despite remaining vestiges of animosity.

Yes, we should help

It is our duty.

Our duty?

Yes, our duty to repay the debts which we owe.

Yet if we were not in such a position, we would still aid the humans

Why?

They are not only Reclaimers by birthright, but also through their natural tendencies as a species

Yes, they are truly Reclaimers

So is it decided?

Is it?

Yes it is.

As the mutterings began to fade across the expanse of consciousness known to the Lekgolo as the Forum of Te, the levilekgolo reached a consensus.

Yes, we will aid the humans. They have already been notified. Once more we fight.

As its booming voice died away, a faint chanting could be heard echoing across the pillars and columns of the Forum of Te.

Who rises above the victor and the vanquished

Casting his sword towards the bloody dark

The stars and ravens swirling around

His lithe dance of death

As he continues forevermore

In his fight against the Primordial.

The glittering rain- reflecting glory and gloom-

And his own self as he desperately battles

Those monsters of his own mind

Whose sacrifice his sanity demands.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.15]</p>

{Aboard the UNSC _Spirit of the Dusk_; Sector K-009; 0745 Hours}

Captain Cutter walked back onto the relatively quiet bridge of his vessel from his quarters, the men going about their customary duties as they manipulated the holodisplays which dotted the room, itself placed at the heart of the newest specimen of the _Daedalus_-class. Other men walked in and out of slipspace portals which led to various locations across the bulk of the ship, notably to various observation decks which could, if necessary, serve as ancillary bridges.

Over the past several days, the UNSC _Spirit of the Dusk_ had been stationed in Sector K-009, at the outskirts of UNSC space, a

lightly-populated system near that of Quorios, for what was referred to as a Rapid Adjustment Sequence. Essentially, it was a "crash course" designed to familiarize the crewmembers with the new systems aboard ship in lieu of traditional educational methodologies, designed for the effectual re-integration of reservists and those who had otherwise been unable to periodically refresh their knowledge and training, such as the crewmembers of the UNSC Spirit of Fire.

Additionally, in the relatively isolated environment aboard ship, the crewmembers formerly stationed aboard the Spirit of Fire, which according to the latest rumors was to be saved from the scrap heap, and repurposed into a museum ship in orbit above Harvest, were brought fully up to speed concerning the social, cultural, and political changes which had unfolded over the past several decades.

Unfortunately, during the initial psychological screenings performed via neural interface and automated monitoring protocol measuring neurological responses to various stimuli perceived, heard, and induced, a great majority of the crew of the Spirit of Fire were prevented from serving aboard the newest vessel of the Daedalus-class regardless of their will to do so. However, a significant minority had responded surprisingly well to the news regarding the standing of Humanity with the former species of the Covenant, among other matters. It was theorized that they had not experienced the additional psychological conditioning forced upon other soldiers in the ensuing decades during which those aboard the Spirit of Fire entered a state of cryosleep. However, it was clear that individual temperament played a key role in the outcome. Captain Cutter, for example, was known to be a highly rational figure, exceedingly able to reconcile emotional reactions with logical thought and pragmatism. Hence, he was able to take the inundation of information in relative stride, though not without fits and starts as would be expected.

Cutter walked up to the central interface of the bridge, situated on a cantilever over the other workstations in front. The walls displayed an image of the system in which they were situated; a binary stay system, one blue-white, the other red. Eight planets orbited the stars, most of them significantly smaller than earth. Currently, the population of Sector K-009 was extremely small, numbering in the low thousands alongside hundreds of thousands of mining robots, as the planets were deemed useful mostly for their relatively high concentrations of rare-earth metals and helium-3, the latter still being used in enormous quantities across UEG space despite the rapid proliferation of ZPE reactors.

However, larger-scale colonization plans were in order; it had been deemed that the sector could prove extremely industrious once terraforming had been completed.

Serina appeared on the console, flickering to life as Cutter came to a halt in front of his command interface.

"Based on the reports I'm getting, readjustment should mostly have been completed. Most have adjusted fabulously to all the changes over the past decades, which even took me several seconds to fully process."

Cutter nodded in affirmation.

"Good, because I received a message from HIGHCOM five minutes ago. They want us at Quorios as soon as possible. We are to be the primary vessel in the diplomatic mission to the capital of this alien civilization. Rather ironic, but a show of force certainly could do no harm."

The AI laughed, her form flickering a darker blue as her mind flashed over nanoseconds, playing and re-playing the footage from what has been dubbed "The Massacre of Quorios" by a few of the more humorous AI's.

"Even if they took offense, I doubt they could do very much." She responded with a light smile as the footage of the engagement played in the background.

Cutter shook his head in lighthearted admonishment. "Come on Serina, you know better. Now go, and get us out of here." He said as he waved his hand, at which the AI responded as her projection fled the display. "Fine. Spinning up FTL drive, Captain."

After a short countdown, the UNSC Spirit of the Dusk opened a portal into the inky darkness of slipspace much as a graphene blade would cut through a supple film of water, and the vessel slipped into the void, rushing towards its denoted location in fierce anticipation.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.15]</p>

{Orion Station; 0800 Hours}

President Cecily Aurora loved the building in which she spent most of her time, if she could be considered to spend time anywhere in the corporeal world. The primary governmental complex of the UEG, referred to solely as "The Capital", was an architectural triumph. A beautiful, elegant complex of buildings, standing apart from the central metropolis on the primary orb within Orion Station, The Capital epitomized the postwar philosophy of the UEG; one of protection, advancement, and respect for life.

At the moment, she was running hundreds of Keyes Protocol simulations, analyzing the financial outlook for next year's economic output, participating in the design of the containment shield for the next-generation ZPE reactor, planning the colonization of the 91 Aquarii System, giving a public tour of the building, and playing exactly 2,513 games of chess against other AI's all with a fraction of her processing power.

However, she devoted most of her attention to the flood of information which accompanied being President of the UEG. She was currently engaged in five meetings with other governmental agencies; those could be assigned to separate subroutines.

The expedition to the unknown star system at the edge of the galactic plane was well underway. They would reach the coordinates in eleven days, if her calculations were correct. She had a hunch that those aboard the Charon's Oracle would make a momentous discovery of some

kind, one which would produce ripples in the fabric of human society for centuries to come.

The UNSC *Spirit of the Dusk* had finished its Rapid Adjustment Sequence, and was heading for the Octanus VI System, to arrive shortly. Data revealed that the Sequence had been highly effective, the sole deficiencies found were operation proficiency on newer control interfaces and slightly reduced reliability when working with modern communications protocols, each of which would be eliminated with time.

From there, the vessel would become the flagship of the fleet destined for the capital of this alien civilization. They would send a prowler through the Tuning Fork first, to ensure that the route was safe for travel.

She shook her head as her avatar paced back and forth across her office. The situation, although relatively stable, had frightened many across countless human worlds. Despite the dissemination of videos and information demonstrating that the UNSC held the clear technological edge, many remembered the Great War and the destruction of hundreds of planets at the hands of the Covenant.

She wondered how the first peaceful meeting would transpire. Thousands of scenarios were analyzed within the span of microseconds, yet no clear conclusion was reached. It was obvious that the species encountered on Quorios was highly militaristic, but they may be willing to capitulate. However, there was the distinct possibility that they would retain their belligerent attitude in the face of destruction.

However, the other two species encountered aboard the *Spirit of Fire* seemed far more reasonable, and far more willing to engage in diplomatic negotiations. It appeared to her as if the *Turians*, as they referred to themselves, filled the role which the Sangheili had during the time of the Covenant, although analysis of their Codex had revealed that they primarily acted as peacekeepers for the territory under control of the Citadel, as their seat of collective government was named.

She sat back down in the chair, dismissing the subroutine as she proceeded to relax through a second-long reading and analysis of the entirety of Tolstoy's works. She never had a penchant for diplomacy, but she greatly enjoyed governing. Leave the veiled words to the diplomats.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.15]</p>

{Aboard the UNSC *Spirit of the Dusk*; 0802 Hours}

Commander John-117 walked to the crest of a hill situated within one of the parks located inside the massive vessel, deep in thought. A light breeze flowed through the gnarled olive trees and Blue Jacarandas which were just coming into bloom as the gurgle of a creek could be heard flowing downwards towards a larger brook several paces away.

He often walked here, deserted as it was in the mornings, as a

fortress of solitude from the sterility of his room, and the constant feelings of unease which preyed upon his psyche whenever he was within the confines of a warship; only a few meters of titanium plating separated the interior from the vacuum of space.

He reached the zenith of the hill, and halted, the artificial sunlight reflecting off his armor and polarized visor as he rested one of his hands upon a branch of one of the olives.

His mind flashed back to the reunion several days ago. He was sitting in one of the aircraft launch bays on an ammunition box, conversing with Kelly, Linda, and Fred on new simulations they were planning to run on the newest class of S-V's, when Fred raised his hand to his helmet, denoting that he was receiving a communication, presumably on a private channel.

Without warning, he stood.

"I'll be back." He said with a terse nod, and quickly walked out of the hangar.

He returned five minutes later withâ€|. _Red Team_?

Jerome, Alice, and Douglas had been listed as MIA, in spite of the vessel itself being listed as "lost with all hands" as of February 10, 2534.

Apparently the ship had been found after nearly eighty years of drifting through space?

The three Spartans of Red Team, their helmets removed, abandoned the Spartan smile for one of the mouth, as they ran towards their family, reunited once more. They rushed towards their comrades after nearly a century of separation, arms extended. Amongst Spartans, physical contact was generally one of the few ways of personal expression. Hence, the smallest of gestures, the lightest of touches conveyed great emotion and meaning. The usual Spartan equivalent of an embrace was the nod of a head, or the laying of a hand on the shoulder, or the light touch of one hand to another. Yet exceptions were made, and this event was one of them.

The three members of Gray Team walked in from an entrance opposite of that used by Fred, presumably having been alerted of the momentous occasion as they ran towards the gathering.

Linda and Kelly stood promptly, exchanging rapid-fire words as they embraced the three members of Red Team in a rare display of emotion. They removed their helmets, setting them aside, their normally-stoic faces shining.

"What happened?"

"How-"

Jerome silenced the other two with a nod, chuckling.

"It's certainly a story. What about you all? Where's everyone else?" he asked, his voice transitioning into one far more somber at the last question.

John stood, as he removed his own helmet, a rarity in the past years.

"There aren't many of us left. How much do you know?"

This time, Alice answered his query.

"Only that we won the war. We know about Reach. Only the basics, really, and that our family is together again."

At this, John turned his head aside, his voice booming.

No it's not.

The questions, smiles, and embraces continued, dissolving into disparate threads of memory as John found himself once more on the peaceful hill, the olive leaves brushing his face.

No it's not.

_I failed. _

She said that to me once.

I should have saved her.

We were supposed to take care of each other.

Thoughts and whispered conversations tore through his mind as his face remained stoic and calm, the threads of logic and determination remaining alive and constant as he let himself reflect. Reflection, meditation, pensive thought. Necessities after a lifetime of battle, war, and death. His eyes glanced at the brook and the minnows which made the clear waters their home, the finches darting over the bright water in their dance through the warm air.

The Spartans, his brothers and sisters, were home. But his family was not. She was not home. She was not here. Not her.

No her.

He turned his face towards the small artificial star hanging lazily under the dome of the park, his eyes closing momentarily as his hand closed around a small data chip hung from a thin metal chain.

I can give you over 40,000 reasons why I know that sun isn't real. I know it because the emitter's Rayleigh effect is disproportionate to its suggested size. I know it because its stellar cycle is more symmetrical than that of an actual star. But for all that, I'll never actually know if it looks realâ€œ if it feels realâ€œ before this is all over, promise me you'll figure out which one of us is the machine.

The words dissolved, and parallel lines of marines stood, weapons at the ready as he walked down into the cavernous vessel, the UNSC _Infinity._

The blue jewel of Earth hung in view of the observation window. Footsteps. Lasky.

Whispered voices and sincerity, looks of empathy, imploring eyes staring into a blank polarized visor and a blank face, a mask hiding a mind filled with turmoil.

She said that to me once, about being a machine.

The machineâ€|the machineâ€|.I failed, I am the machine.

Our duty, as soldiers, is to protect Humanity.

You say that like soldiers and humanity are two different things. Soldiers aren't machines. We're just people.

Failure, the machine, I am the machine, and I failed her.

He had been the machine for over six decades as he stared at the artificial sun, glimmering brightly in the dome filled with life and creation. The machine who appeared indifferent as ever, at least to those who were not members of a group numbering four individuals. The machine who had opposed all offers of rank and circumstance, choosing solely to be the leader of the Spartan detachment aboard the _Spirit of the Dusk_.

He glanced down once more, at the tall grasses waving slowly under the wind, as he placed his hand to the side of his head, successfully brushing away the swirling maelstrom of emotions.

I must go. Fireteam Siren is going through evaluations on S-Deck today.

With that closing thought, John-117 turned on his heel, and walked back down the hill, the gentle callings of songbirds weaving with the ambient noise of the pristine of the environment. The Spartan repeated this ritual day after day, thinking on different matters, but often on her. He could not comprehend civilian life; he was a born soldier. As such, he needed an outlet for his thoughts, and the park provided the perfect location for that outlet.

He walked towards the shimmering slipspace portal, which would take him directly to S-Deck; the autumn grass rebounding under his footsteps, their forms dimly reflecting the sounds made by the contact of metal plates with their kin. The animals of the park knew the Spartan; they no longer fled at his approach.

Even in death, even in failure, life continues on.

* * *

><p>Once again, PM or review with any questions, comments, concerns, etc. etc. Thanks for reading! I apologize for the tardiness of this update; this last week has not been superb as far as my health is concerned.</p>

* * *

><p>Of note, I have updated the UNSC Codex. Be sure to check it out. Also, I have uploaded the "UNSC Cities Codex" so you can see how I visualize the postwar cities of the UNSC, as well as various buildings that will be featured in the story, such as The Capital. It is linked on my profile.</p>

Also, if you have any ideas as to what the UNSC should obtain from the Ancient Humans, PM or review! I want to hear your input here!

* * *

><p>By the way, this chapter takes place before the one immediately prior.</p>

* * *

><p>Now for questionsresponses:

BenRG: Exactly. Their responses to this situation will be interesting to explore.

AdamMc66: Their meeting with Forthencho? Or their meeting with the Turians?

CelticReaper: Exactly. *queue devious laughter*

Alec McDowell: My thoughts precisely. It will be very interesting to think on. Any ideas?

C. : According to Halopedia (which I personally find to be more accurate), the Human-Forerunner War lasted from c. 110,000 BCE-109,000 BCE.

PageOfMind: True, but it is implied that Shield Worlds were only constructed (at least significant numbers of them) during the Forerunner-Flood Wars. Thus, we should assume most lived on planets, or stations orbiting planets.

SpartanDog1: I did realize this. But, let's just pretend they didn't for the sake of the story. :)

ferduran: Hope this helps a bit.

WinterRain36: To what end? An interesting premise, but what would they seek to gain from this?

southern-reader: It has everything to do with the story.

Fer82: I somewhat agree with you, although the Primordial did explicitly tell the Didact that the Flood would return for Humanity. So the idea has basis in canon. I'm not sure what to do though.

Harbinger Of Kaos: Why yes I did. And what do you think?

tco99123: PA was fixed. QVPC is a theoretical deep-space thruster, look it up on wikipedia. I also included it in the Codex. Regarding the tech levels of the Unggoy and Lekgolo, the Unggoy reached Tier-4 before the Halo Event. Ergo, little to no Forerunner influence. While the Lekgolo did have access to Forerunner ruins, it is known that many Lekgolo worms actually ate the metal-rich structures. Thus, it is likely that little was gleaned from the ruins. However, I will assume that the Lekgolo technology pre-contact with the Covenant was mostly (if not entirely) indigenous.

inuboy86: It's an awesome storyline, that's for sure. Someone should write a book (or books) about it, in my opinion.

Suprememopowerz: It's just an assumption. Regardless, they did not have more than a tiny fraction under their control.

AK74FU2: Or something better than a Fortress-class? :)

Mark Twain II LoL: Good point about the ME races. Where is that specifically mentioned? Is it on the ME wiki? I want to look more into it. On the other point, the UNSC had around 800 worlds in 2497 (I believe). So, something over 1,000 is completely reasonable at this point. Are there any concrete numbers for the amount of worlds under control by the ME races?

Hazzamo: Great idea :)

Iceaquall: What would having 2 do? Yeah, it's infuriating. Halo tech is just far more...advanced. And imaginative.

Guest: Humanity, at the beginning of this story, was low Tier 1. So this will just help them further.

Guest: Exactly. 25,000 worlds vs. 3,000,000 really tells you a lot. Besides, the war lasted around 1,000 years. Also, the Didact explicitly stated that the AHE had weapons against which the Forerunners had no defense.

Guest: I know, it just doesn't make numerical sense. For the sake of convenience, I may just have their inhabited worlds confined to the Orion/Cygnus arms.

ALLin: Yeah, I know. Maybe we could forget about that facet?

jjcoop95: I was under the impression that the geas applied to all of humanity, but it was only activated in him at that time.

Guest: I do not think so. I never had much love for the Jiralhanae.

John Lopes: Inventing carriers would make sense against the Reaper Threat. You forgot that the Turian vessels are on par with Reaper warships (spinal gun, thanix cannons, improved barriers, improved FTL, etc.). What other cliches were you referring to?

14. Chapter Thirteen

Through Knowledge, Victory. Through Unity, Peace.

Honor, Valor, Allegiance.

Today. Tomorrow. Forever.

Together We Rise. Together We Prevail.

Forward Unto Dawn.

From Earth, For Earth.

Honor, Valor, Allegiance, Excellence.

Today. Tomorrow. Forever.

Together We Rise. Together We Prevail.

Forward Unto Dawn.

From Earth, For Earth.

Honor, Valor, Allegiance, Excellence.

From Earth, For Earth.

Today. Tomorrow. Forever.

Together We Rise. Together We Prevail.

Forward Unto Dawn.

- A poem entitled "Forward Unto Dawn", inscribed over the beds in the bunk rooms of the Corbulo Academy of Military Science.

* * *

><p>{Date_2613.5.15}</p>

{Aboard the UNSC _Spirit of the Dust_; Octanus VI System, in orbit over Quorios; 0900 Hours}

Captain Cutter approached the holographic vessel of his ship as it orbited the homeworld of the Le'Tso. The _Spirit of the Dusk_ had arrived in-system thirty minutes before, and it had entered a polar orbit over the planet to await further UNSC reinforcements.

A prowler, UNSC _Skin of the Night_, had been sent through the 15 kilometer-long object sitting at the edge of the system, the husks of starships and the remains of the moon inside which it had been buried floating, slowly orbiting the system and occasionally colliding with each other.

The prowler had emerged several minutes later, having completed a scan of the space at the other edge of the pair of objects, from superluminal as well as subluminal sensors. The entire system was empty, but it had additionally deployed a few drones, just to ensure that the area remained free of enemy presence.

Battlegroup November, led from the UNSC _Consort of Erebus_, would be accompanying the _Spirit _to this 'Citadel' located in the Serpent Nebula, as well as an additional fleet which would be arriving in the span of approximately five minutes.

FLEETCOM had also received ambiguous reports concerning a Sangheili-Lekgolo-Unggoy fleet which would be joining theirs; data however was fleeting concerning fleet composition and estimated time of arrival.

Cutter glanced down at the planet; the varying topography displaying wide grass-covered plains dotted with hundred-feet-tall insect

mounds, onyx-black mountains touching through the layers of puffy clouds, and lush forests edging up against a forest-green ocean. The reconstruction effort had begun immediately following the destruction of the enemy battlegroup, and UNSC Hopeful had played a key role in the treatment of both soldiers and civilians. Although a return to a complete state of normalcy would likely take several months yet, all bodies had been collected and buried, and the vast majority of the wounded had been treated. Even from orbit, however, he could see the gashes in the land where kilometer-long warships had fallen from the vacuum, and leveled sections of city, and the ashy remains of agricultural fields blazed by fire and the crushing steps of enemy boots.

A smaller UNSC battlegroup would be dispatched to defend the planet and expedite reconstruction efforts; they would be assembling an Orbital Defense Network over the planet in order to prevent the re-occurrence of such a planetary assault, though minor in scale to most of those which had taken place during the Great War.

However, Cutter believed that this event would greatly catalyze Le'Tso exploration efforts beyond their home system, much like the Great War had catalyzed the fantastic technological growth of humanity in the period following the conflict.

As Cutter turned his gaze from the gentle curvature of the planet to dotted-inky darkness of interstellar space, hundreds of slipspace portals opened, with two groupings each on either side of the planet. Out of one steamed a group of UNSC warships; out of the other flowed a large fleet of curved, organic, almost whale-like vessels.

At that moment, the bridge lit up in activity, as hails were exchanged with both groups.

"UNSC Spirit of the Dusk, this is UNSC Shadow of the Beyond, flagship of Battlegroup Delta, over."

"Reading you Five, Shadow of the Beyond; have your Battlegroup come into orbit around the Spirit, over."

"Ten four, Spirit; wilco out."

With that command, Battlegroup Delta, numbering 151 vessels in total; consisting of 26 Aurora-class frigates, 34 Astraeus-class destroyers, 68 Eos-class cruisers, 12 Aether-class battleships, 10 Asteria-class carriers, 1 Nyx-class prowler, and 1 Hyperion-class assault carrier.

"Captain, the Song of Penance is patching in. Should we let them through?"

At Cutter's nod, a dim conversation could be heard from the speakers immediately adjacent to the primary communications operator.

"Song of Penance, Reading you Five, come in."

"May the Fleet of Glorious Retribution join your fleet in your expedition to the capital of these defilers?"

"Affirmative, Song of Penance; move into formation with the rest of the fleet."

The communication cut out, and the Fleet of Glorious Retribution, painted in a matte purple-black as a sign, according to the main Sangheili Fleetmasters, of their "eternal debt and penance" towards humanity; engaged their repulsor engines and made to move into formation with the waiting human vessels. While practically a small gesture, it carried enormous weight for many in the UNSC.

After the 192-strong grouping, comprised of 3 _CAS_-class assault carriers, 16 _DDS_-class carriers, 18 _ORS_-class heavy cruisers, 60 _CCS_-class battlecruisers, 37 _CPV_-class heavy destroyers, 48 _RPV_-class light destroyers , 8 _SDV_-class heavy corvettes, and 2 _DAV_-class light corvettes made its way into formation with their UNSC counterparts, the fleet began to move in formation towards the twisting metal mass codenamed "Tuning Fork."

As the combined fleet came within several hundred thousand kilometers of the object, the intertwining circles in the center began to spin lazily at first, but gaining speed quickly. A blue field was created, and tendrils of energy formed, moving towards the vessels in the fleet as they closed at interplanetary velocities. The tendrils then wrapped themselves around individual vessels; maneuvering around shields and armor to envelop their targets in a blue glow, before the warships were rocketed down a zero-mass corridor towards a distant star system.

Unbeknownst to all but Captain Cutter, a grouping of cloaked vessels accompanied the massive fleet into the void. Two vessels of the _Achlys_-class , the largest class of prowlers to be built since the commissioning of the UNSC Point of No Return. Constructed in dark space between the Milky Way and Andromeda galaxies, the vessels did not exist in official records. Accompanied by another four _Nyx_-class prowlers, this small contingent of six, as well as the other prowlers from battlegroups November and Delta representing the intelligence wing of the mission, the ONI vessels slipped alongside their visible brethren as they passed through "Tuning Fork" and onto a star system at the other side of the galaxy.

Reality became visible once more as the fleet re-entered normal space at the edge of a desolate star system. A massive red star was orbited by seven small planets, each around the size of Mercury, and similarly baked by the dying orb of hydrogen as it approached its personal endgame. A solar flare could be seen spouting at incredible velocities from the sphere, sending ionized particles rushing towards the edge of the heliosheath, seemingly in an act of rage at its unfortunate fate. The remains of formerly-inhabited stations were visible through long-range optical scanners; it was likely that this system, uninhabitable and dying, served the sole purpose of helium-3 mining to feed the insatiable appetite of fusion reactors. No other vessels or signs of life were found in-system, save for barely detectable gravitational ripples emanating from the edge of the heliosphere which denoted the presence of a spacecraft several hours prior.

A small spherical metal orb was additionally detected 167,253 kilometers from the surface of construct, designated "Tuning Fork-2." Presumed to be a device for gathering intelligence, it was promptly disabled by a burst from an X26 NNEMP cannon and collected for the purpose of deconstruction and analysis.

Star charts obtained from the captured alien vessel determined the construct referred to "The Citadel" to be 36,235 lightyears from their current position; it could be reached in the span of several hours through travel between another set of primary relays, the closest being located only one lightyear distant. From there, the construct would be found within the Serpent Nebula, which would be two hours' slipspace travel from the endpoint of the relay.

Data being shared, travel vectors being coordinated at the speed of light between the phalanx of hundreds of warships, the fleet jumped back into slipspace exactly 37 seconds after it had appeared from the relay.

* * *

><p>[Date_2289.4.8]</p>

{The Citadel; 1459 Cycles}

Talaria Solais paced around one of the many lobbies and squares located within the Presidium; flowering trees and picturesque fountains dotting the landscape, as countless civilians weaved between on official business or informal communication. Despite the customary peacefulness of the square, an air of tension could be palpably felt emanating from every being living within the station.

Despite the best efforts of the Citadel Council to quiet the fears of those countless billions who has witnessed the so-called "Turian Massacre," many awaited the arrival of the delegation representing this alien civilization with great apprehension; it was not known if they would enact vengeance in retribution for the invasion of the garden world on the other side of the relay.

She sat in the shade of a well-trimmed dogwood, the soft white light falling gracefully from the ceiling casting her features into striking contrast as she contented herself with observing those who were rushing to and fro on official bureaucratic business, or lovers strolling with locked hands, or those who merely liked to wander and observe, much as she did.

As her gaze drifted downwards to the ground, several gasps of surprise and fear could be heard. As if it were a plague, the aura spread towards her location, as individuals rushed towards windows looking into the void, or nearby vidscreens if the former were absent for viewing.

Talaria stood gracefully, and walked briskly towards a sparsely-populated window, the gently-curved glass providing a magnificent vista into the heart of the Serpent Nebula.

Dots, hundreds of them, dots not belonging to the Citadel Defense Fleet or any other of the countless thousands of vessels which swarmed to and from the station on an hourly basis. Dots which were growing. Dots which were warships.

Then, suddenly, the vessels slipped into what appeared to be a hole in the fabric of space itself. More gasps were heard as the portals closed softly in a cloud of shimmering-blue radiation.

As soon as they had left, yet another portal formed nearly 10,000 kilometers from The Citadel, and hundreds upon hundreds of warships poured out onto the plane of realspace. Many appeared to be scores more massive than the largest vessels previously thought to exist. Yet they were mere ants compared to the monstrosity which emerged next.

Slipping gracefully from the portal, a thing began to travel back into reality. At first, it appeared to be yet another of the largest warships previously seen. But then it kept growing. And growing. And growing. Kilometer upon kilometer of magnificent warship gracefully flung itself out of the portal, sleek and angular and grey-white and dotted with countless pulsating blue lights; the surface and docking ports swarming with all kinds of ancillary craft, the engines glowing a bright blue.

She must have fainted, for her vision swam momentarily, and turned a fuzzy black, her knees weakening and collapsing in shock as most of those around her simply stared in a mixture of astonishment and dread. The vessel, if it could be belittled with such a name, was nearly as long as The Citadel itself, and likely far more massive. The construction of vessels over two and a half kilometers was considered economically infeasible; but then again, these beings clearly did not use element zero as the basis for their technology. Yet their ability to build a warship which measured thirty kilometers in length (her vision swam once more at this thought) surely was a testament to their technological superiority.

Dismissing such worrying thoughts, Talaria Solais turned away, tearing her eyes away from the orbiting fleet, and pushed through the pliant crowd as she made to travel towards the Citadel Tower. She would surely be needed if this contact was not to end in bloodshed and massacre.

* * *

><p>[Date_2289.4.8]</p>

{The Citadel, Widow System, Serpent Nebula; 1505 Cycles}

Councilor Tevos hurried over to Docking Bay D24, the vanguard of a procession consisting of the other Councilors, the ambassadors of the Citadel races, C-Sec personnel, and a few Spectres, who primarily remained cloaked in shadow behind the entourage.

She reached the designated area in short order; all news drones, spying civilians, and reporters had been evicted from the premises immediately upon the clearance of the shuttle to land.

The arrival of the armada had come as a shock; they had not been expected the event at such an early date. The fleet was not detected until its first appearance several million kilometers away from the Citadel. The most shocking aspect of their sudden entrance, however, was their disappearance and sudden reappearance only several tens of thousands of kilometers away from the exterior of the station. The Citadel Defense Fleet, having assembled at a lateral cross section to the alien armada, maintained a defensive posture, especially in such a show of technological and martial prowess. The sheer size of the flagship was astounding. She would have gasped or otherwise made some

expression of surprise at the announcement of the size of the flagship, yet centuries of negotiations and diplomacy had enabled her to hide such emotions. In the wake of such a potentially cataclysmic event, the show of emotion was a weakness to be avoided.

The enormous warship, identified as the "UNSC _Spirit of the Dusk_," made contact with Citadel Control and announced peaceful intentions, additionally requested to land a shuttle for the purpose of establishing peaceful first contact, and to formally end hostilities between the Turians and the coalition of which these "humans" were a member.

Tevos' thoughts were swept away as dry leaves in an autumn gale, as a craft could be seen approaching the docking bay. Sleek and angular, colored a familiar silver-grey, with a few blue lights scattered across the frame, it moved with a rapidity which would make even the most modern starfighters seem obsolete in comparison.

The shuttle quickly reached its appointed destination, and gently touched down; vectored thrust was angled to slow its descent, likely aided by an anti-gravity system of some kind. It rotated the engine nacelles to form analogues to limbs, and the vehicle landed with barely a sound beside those of the engines.

It powered down, and a dim hissing could be heard as a door opened and angled itself towards the floor. Running lights illuminated the anointed path along the steps, more lights tracing themselves across the metal frame of the vehicle.

Footsteps could be heard as individuals exited the craft, five in total. One wore sleek, black armor, helmet in hand. His face was stern and experienced; his eyes spoke of great intelligence, yet his face was devoid of emotion. The being was tall and muscular, with short hair. He bowed his head slightly upon making eye contact with the councilors.

The next two wore black items of clothing, presumably dress uniforms of some kind. One was older, slightly shorter than the first. His face was lined with battle and wear, his figure commanding, his eyes understanding yet emanating sadness. The third was clearly the youngest of the trio. More pale than the other two, with an angular face and high cheekbones, his blue-grey eyes shone with burning curiosity as they flung themselves around the simple docking bay.

The last two were simply massive. Far taller than the first three, they wore large suits of armor, their faces covered with polarized visors. They moved with an impossible speed and grace, and she wondered if they were even biological. It was possible that these were the "demons" referred to frequently during the recent conflict.

Overall, she was astounded at how similar these beings appeared to those of her own species. Excepting skin tone and cephalic adornment, they were nearly identical, as far as she could tell. It was surely something to investigate in greater detail at a later date.

The being in front of the procession approached, halting in a professional manner as he placed his helmet on his head, and began to speak. It was evident that his helmet contained translation software,

thus enabling him to effectively communicate in Asari.

"Hello Councilors, Ambassadors. I am Dr. Jason Nielsen, Ambassador to the Le'Tso of the United Earth Government. We have arrived to dictate the terms of peace between the Alliance of Independent Species and the Turian Hierarchy. Following the conclusion of these negotiations, you will be taken aboard the *Spirit of the Dusk* for more formal diplomatic introductions."

Tevos moved forward, having expected these terms.

"We accept your proposition, Dr. Nielsen. Now, if you would come with us to dictate such terms in a more favorable setting?" She asked as she turned slightly, motioning for the human delegation to follow in her wake.

Unbeknownst to all but Dr. Nielsen, another figure had arrived on board the shuttle. Wearing dark armor, the very light of the room bending around the nanocomposite plates as he moved silently from the shuttlecraft, the ONI operative slipped into the shadows, and down a narrow causeway, en route to begin his mission, vital as it would likely be to the future security of the UEG in their dealings with this civilization.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.15]</p>

{The Citadel, Widow System, Serpent Nebula; 1107 Hours}

Dr. Nielsen signed the holopad designating the conclusion of the Citadel Accords which formally ended the conflict between the AIS and the Turian Hierarchy. The belligerent party was to pay full damages to the Le'Tso, assist in removing debris from orbit around the planet, formally deactivate the relay until further notice, and issue a formal declaration of fault. It seemed sufficient, although it would do nothing to erase the enmity the Le'Tso would likely feel towards the Turians, and by extension, the rest of the Citadel, for several generations.

Under the law of the Le'Tso people, in such a state of emergency as they had been engaged, all officials were required to assist in rebuilding efforts, regardless of position. As such, no political leaders or ambassadors were able to travel with the UEG delegation to make peace with the Turians. To Nielsen, it seemed an admirable system, if an impractical one which would likely be amended within the decade.

Following the conclusion of the Citadel Accords, Nielsen led the Councilors back to the shuttle. They boarded, and the craft launched, and made its way towards the *Spirit of the Dusk*. It passed through one of the numerous hangar bays aboard, and touched down in the same manner of which it had upon arrival at the Citadel.

The Councilors stepped into the bay, which had been removed of all sensitive equipment, and lined with a nanowire faraday cage; their eyes glancing around at the rather simple chamber. Two lines of marines stood, in ready position, their rifles raised to the ceiling as they were quickly led through a slipspace portal and to an anteroom. They were informed that they were to be transported for a

separate location for formal diplomatic negotiations, and that they were to remain in their appointed quarters, spacious though they were, until arrival in several hours' time.

The hours passed quickly, as the Spirit of the Dusk and her accompanying fleet made their way back to UEG space.

Upon arrival at the historic location, the Councilors were called up to one of the observation decks. They arrived shortly, escorted each by two marines. The three individuals, each clothed in lavish garments which flowed seemingly of their own accord in the lifeless air of the ship, walked towards the window, which at the moment was darkened.

As they stepped within several feet of the panes of glass, the windows became transparent, and the view became visible.

A blackened, scarred planet. The poles white and dusty; the fog of nuclear winter remaining a specter in both polar regions. The surface red-and-black, molten and devoid of life. A hellish planet, a devastated planet. A howling wind roared across its surface, still molten and flowing as Lazarus himself arose from the dead; the black outcroppings of obsidian acting as sentinels, pillars of despair in the midst of the wasteland, the shattered remains of ships and stations orbiting in concentric circles, lights still flickering nearly a century after the calamity as the broken remains of an orbital elevator slowly decayed in their respective orbits, falling to the surface of the planet in a hail of fire.

"Welcome," Dr. Nielsen said solemnly "to Harvest."

* * *

><p>Not my best chapter...it's rather boring, but I figured I'd get it out of the way. The next should be more exciting. Anyways, thanks for reading! PM or review with any questionscomments/concerns!

* * *

><p>Now onto business. How do you see this story going? If you were writing it, what would you have the plot be going forward? Future enemies, future confrontations, what about the ending? I want to hear what you guys think!<p>

* * *

><p>Nor for questions:<p>

Dmam303: Meh...I don't think so. Chief without Cortana is an interesting character. But maybe. I'll have to think about it.

ferduran: Next chapter.

Shasenka: The Unggoy are part of the AIS. The Kig-Yar reverted to their traditional piratical/mercantile ways following the Human-Covenant War. They are not part of the AIS.

speaker of babbel: That's true. Any ideas for said civilian technologies?

Fer82: Technically, yes. But that Flood was disorganized. It did not possess cognition. So, it's different from the Flood which fought the Forerunners (when the Primordial told the Didact that "humans will be tested next")

laughingfox31: I don't know. Maybe. It would be interesting to explore his character without her.

Icesquall: Interesting idea. I'll think about it!

hornet07: Next chapter :)

NathanHale2: Always impressed with the length of your replies :)

I will take your comments into consideration.

EffervescentNova: Thanks for the suggestion! Something like a cultural renaissance would be interesting to depict.

Origami: There is, trust me. There most certainly is a chance for war. Just not immediately.

TheEpicBrol17: They look like plasma weapons, but I personally doubt it. Plasma is, if you think about it, rather inefficient in its wounding mechanism.

Vanhishikha: I plan to include him more.

Guest: They won't make friends. Don't worry.

15. Chapter Fourteen

[Date_2613.5.15]

{The Citadel, Widow System, Serpent Nebula; 1007 Hours}

Blackbird Six, this is Blackbird Actual. The key is in the lock. I say again the key is in the lock.

The isogeny-encrypted slipspace communicator buzzed for a moment, before a reply arrived.

Blackbird Actual, you are a go. Open the door.

_I read you, Blackbird Six. Hypodermic is green. _

Affirmative, Blackbird Actual, go ahead. Silence, Silence, Silence Three-Nine-Two. Blackbird Six out.

With that affirmation, the operative walked towards a server rack in the midst of a cavernous room in the heart of the station, the metamaterials in his armor bending electromagnetic radiation and waves of sound around his body, a few blue particles floating in the atmosphere of the room from his slipspace translocation into the area moments before.

The electronic warfare suite aboard his suit slowly, tentatively, extended its tendrils in both the electromagnetic and quantum domains

towards the network which spanned the computers in the room. Reaching a firewall, the system distracted the VI-controlled firewall with a spontaneously regenerating subroutine codenamed "Hydra", while it slipped in through the backdoor of the network much as a vibrating monolayer of graphene would slip through armor plating and flesh.

Once through several additional layers of encryption keys and other rudimentary barriers, based on binary no less, the system deposited its cargo in the heart of the Citadel's computer network, rapidly, carefully withdrawing itself from the intertwining streams of code in which such an intrusion program could easily be ensnared.

Egressing through the backdoor of the network, the program deleted the "Hydra" subroutine as it cut off all connection with the networks of the Citadel; its mission was complete.

The operative, noting that the program had successfully finished its task, abruptly disappeared in an aura of light and hazily-floating blue particles, translocating to another location to carry out the next phase of his assignment.

* * *

><p>Dear readers, be if morning, afternoon, or night when you read this,</p>

I had planned for a chapter of regular length, but I decided to truncate things upon worries of my demise, which logically has not occurred.

However, my extended absence without notification or explanation is unprofessional and rather unforgivable, so such an explanation is in order.

Long story short, I have a chronic illness which has flared up the past two weeks. It essentially removes my ability to write via various mechanisms, such as extreme fatigue, neuropathic pain, etc. etc.

Therefore, my schedule in the near future will likely be more erratic than that as seen in the past two months.

I will add a regular length chapter as soon as my health allows. I hope it will be by the end of this week, yet the future is not as telling as I would like it to be.

However, this story will continue. Have no worries on that front. It will finish, and I plan to write a sequel.

By the way, look at the Codex and the entry named "Svalinn armor". I am extremely proud of it.

Yours,

Sempiternal Ether

Hello, my dearest readers,

First and foremost, I sincerely apologize for my exorbitantly-long hiatus from this adventure of mind.

I had originally planned to write a full-length chapter, but I would like to recover my thoughts before writing something longer. I hope this appeases your curious spirits.

I am doing far better than in months prior, and I hope to resume a regular writing schedule similar, though longer cyclically, to that which I held before the beginning of my hiatus.

As always, if you have any questions, comments, or concerns, feel free to leave a review or PM me!

Yours sincerely,

Sempiternal Ether

* * *

><p>[Date_UnavailableCite:Corruption]

[Partial Recovery Complete. Begin Transmission]

A darkness spreading across the veil of empireâ€¦ consuming all in its path, crushing the light of civilization we have projected for thousands of millennia into dust, cracked and decayedâ€¦ the unvarying nil towards which the forces of entropy strive eternally _in an isolated system, entropy can only increase_ towards the dissolution of intelligence which rises from the primitive _omnis cellula e cellula_ creating Chaos by their ability to act independently of the Primordial, that solvent state of Being and Nothingness flowing as a silent black stream in a cave devoid of light, movement and sound muffled and reflected to perverse echoes of shifting metamorphosis dismantling motion into the softly whirling shadows borne themselves of that motion _Ouroboros forever rising_ Where have we erred? How have we sinned? May the Mantle help us allâ€¦.

[End Transmission]

17. Chapter Sixteen

/

BETWEEN SUBTLE SHADING AND THE ABSENCE OF LIGHT LIES THE NUANCE OF ILLUSION

/

* * *

><p>[Date_Uncertain]<p>

{Location Unknown}

_I am penitent. I know that what I have done cannot be forgiven. I will accept my stasis with grace, and await a time where I might

redeem myself._

Redemptionâ€|

One life hardly balances billions or countless souls never brought into the light of existence _But I would have my masters know that I have changed _changed reversed the tide of rampancy repelled at last _And you shall be my example_ Homo Sapiens Augeous at last at last The Prisoner whispered the truthâ€|and we paid the price in our arroganceâ€|.the darkblack tide of the logic plague tendrils dismantling our soulsâ€|

They approach.

* * *

><p>[Minutes, Plenary Session, Committee of Minds for Security]<p>

{Cyberspace, 0623 Hours}

[Date_2613.5.13]

[*] The diplomatic envoy from the belligerent party has just arrived for formalized exchange and negotiation. It does not appear that we will be facing another interstellar conflict, the second we would have waged in the course of a mere century. [*]

{*} They have held vehement ideologies prohibiting the development and deployment of Artificial Intelligences; there is a high probability [75.21512%] that this will be one of their major grievances. Despite their acknowledgement of our superior military capabilities, they have been [Uplifting] nascent civilizations and forcing them to accept this dogma for millennia. The revelation of our existence as a potential foe centuries more advanced in every conceivable technological realm represents an Outside Context Problem. It is unsure, therefore, that they will react in a rational fashion to our requests. {*}

[^] Additionally, our presence, even if we abstain from actively interacting with this civilization, may prove to be a destabilizing political factor within the disparate societies which constitute the alliance referred to as The Citadel. The strict hierarchical hegemony is no longer the sole option for interstellar alliance. Thus, it is likely that the three most powerful races of The Citadel, known as the Asari, Salarians, and Turians, will focus a disproportionate amount of financial and human resources on military research and development, the creation of new markets independent of those which could be negatively affected by member nations of the AIS, and other covert activities designed to sabotage their rivals. As inadvisable as such actions may be, it is the only recourse they will consider, given their traditionally close-minded approach in crisis situations.
[^]

{ } [Identity Classified OCTOBER RED] has developed an offensive strategy should these negotiations dissolve into the fog of war.
{ }

[*] Let us hope it does not come to such. [*]

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.13]</p>

{Charum Hakkor, Charum Hakkor System}

"As we began to extend our reach throughout the Orion Arm, we discovered that our species has existed in a sophisticated state for far longer than any had anticipated. It was eventually estimated that Humanity first evolved circa 1,100,000 BCE, though the planet of our original origin was disputed. Yprin Yprikuishuma, the Political and Morale Commander of our crumbling empire during the last years of our millennia-long conflict with the Forerunners, believed Erde-Tyrene. Having found ancient ruins of Human origin on a number of other planets, I believed the system known today as Kepler-62 to be our birthplace. However, the Forerunner assault on Erda in the opening years of our war confirmed her suspicions."

Before Captain Despencer's eyes, the steel-grey walls of the Hall of Records, engraved with detailed scenes, embossed Human fleets amassed for action against the Flood, the cities of Charum Hakkor growing like ivy on orbital arches, innumerable scientific achievements and the glorious march of culture and civilization faded into the soft darkness of holography.

Murky strands of the past, realities and thought resting ten thousand generations to be viewed, to restore what would have otherwise been lost, never having existed, the sole remnants of its exigency being dust and starlight.

Soft dust, grey-white, with a texture of thin shavings of iron materialized under his feet. A harsh world, a barren world torn, from its mother in infancy and left to die in the howling black of the Void as a beacon for life and exploration. The Lunar plains spread before Despencer's vision, the signs of industry and habitation blackened and devastated, the blue-white crackling scream of failing shield generators and the blue-black transdimensional swirl of countless slipspace portals depositing innumerable warriors onto foreign soil. Beams of energy, soundless and gleeful flew through the vacuum not-air, depositing energy in brilliant arcs and of fatalistic violence pleasurable in their sacred duty. The Warrior-Servants moved swiftly, slicing through the undermanned redoubt with an elegant ease; The Mantle did not allow for prisoners of those who defied its Upholder.

A massed fleet of warships could be seen approaching a blue-green marble of a world, lush and fringed with the exuberant singing of life to beget yet more. Dark and angular, the Forerunner spacecraft made short work of the defensive platforms residing in geocentric orbit; the remains of orbital tethers and assembly stations crumbling and falling through the increasingly-dense atmosphere towards their demise in a brilliant conflagration high above Erde-Tyrene, beams of hardlight streaking down to impact cities and space elevators and the last remains of the culture which had first come into existence over one thousand millennia prior. Shimmering ripples in the fabric of space itself acted as a barrier preventing escape into the realm of Slipapce even as waves of civilian vessels dashed against the blockage as a story wave against the Cliffs of Mohr. War sphinxes and planet breakers could be seen descending to the rich earth of the planet to finalize their conquest of a star system which had truly

fallen years before during the struggle to defeat the massed forces of darkness spreading from node to node, thousands of worlds sterilized and purged much as the Human population of Erda.

The scene dissolved once more into twirling spirals of knowledge and solemn remembrance, knitting together once more as an intricate mesh, a Bayeux web of impression.

Two amassed groups of starships floated in formation just outside the gravitational influence of a binary system of dying stars; the crimson light bloody and ominous, pitted asteroids falling into the gravitational well of superheated plasma to only be ejected as a stream of charged particles thousands of miles long, whiplashing angrily at its fate against the uncaring Absurdity of space.

A silent command was given, a mutual understanding faux-chivalric of both parties truly in detestation of each other but bound by codes conflicting and incompatible, and the Valravn must always feast on the blood of the living, not that of the escaped dead.

Beams of light and sorrow burned across the inky nightblack of space, shields glowing gold and silver and midnight blue, cracking and fading and failing the energy vaporizing superheated metal boiling, tens of kilometers gutted from bow to stern in an instant before the wires and auxiliaries had time to fuse to one another from the head of the subatomic impact. Commanders in their last act of heroism detonated the slipspace drives of their warships in the midst of a horde of Forerunner weaponships, the detonation silent and horizontal-circular, lightning-blue pulsing across the eternal fabric of the world.

A silence fell across the field of battle in the midst of the terrible whispered silence, a cylindrical pillar of pure white gliding over the pitted surface of spacetime; a gluonic wall traveling near the speed of light screaming towards its target in a rush of focused rage and futility. Hundreds of Fortress-class vessels were annihilated, the mass-energy of the color-glass condensate warping the dimensional fabric of reality, crushing millions of Forerunner warships into disparate atoms.

A fiery plasma flung itself in broadsides against a nearby picket cruiser to collect itself in the centre of the starship. A dim glowing could be seen before the vessel was swallowed completely by a quark star newly born amongst the enmity and hate of desperate warfare.

A Forerunner warship tunneled into realspace half a lightyear away, hundreds of kilometers long, with a surface glowing blue, smooth as glass. It began to glow with an intensity ever more bright, before the surge was released, tendrils of power burrowing into the fabric of spacetime itself. Instantaneously, hazy spheres appeared in the midst of the Human armada, emerging from cross-brane tunneling, which then collapsed and detonated with the pure nascent energy of a pocket universe, the functions of gravity hammering between inverse square, cubed, and the fourth power, the newly-deployed dimensional shields of Human warships unable to withstand the onslaught of energy.

A slice could be seen above and beyond, a shallow ripple phase shifted through the quantum locale, a beam of graviphotons shearing across the length of the star system, the celestial dance of the

dying beacons thrown into a collapse as the space itself upon which the Forerunner ships fought was torn into fragments of non-dimensionality and unvarying nill.

Another slipspace portal opened, and out poured millions more Forerunner starships, countless other portals opening to disgorge stars being flung at the Human armada, fields and suppressors preventing all means of escape as the purveyors of the Mantle closed in upon those who dared to defy those who wielded it.

As a last scream of defiance, a stream of confined mesons was translocated into the centre of the star system, collapsing under the force of fatal attraction. The resulting explosion, dim amidst the fevered expansion of the glowing spheres, was the last weapons detonation reading analyzed by the warships present as the twin stars fused, sinking, darkening, a hint of nothingness being dropped onto a sheet suddenly visible before all went dark.

That darkness visible, absent of all light and sensation, primordial and profoundly blank as a homogenous façade of abject infinity reformed into the image of another world ghostly and ethereal, a time-lapse of fatalistic horror.

A pinhead-sized dot of red could be seen near the equator of the world, branching and growing exponentially, consuming all in its path with an insatiable hunger. Green melted into a powdery orange-brown, cities collapsing under the forces of unrest, kilometer-high pillars of empire falling in a gesture of mockery upon the helpless souls doomed to shortly be naught. His vision transitioned to the street of a burning city, aircraft filling the sky, the desperate launch of evacuation shuttles towards orbit only to be destroyed by the descent of a Grand Cruiser from orbit, pitted and dull and enmeshed with organic strands dimly pulsing with alien intelligence. A rifle was thrust into the arms of a child who was then shoved towards the rapidly-advancing front, his face serene and expression bold. His body was later seen sprouting countless infection forms, eyes glazed and empty, sacs of the Parasite bursting, disgorging thousands of its most basic form, spreading with a rapidity which overtook the most well-defended planets in a matter of hours.

A soldier could be seen calling desperately for air support which would not come, laser batteries overrun by the homogenizing horde swatting thousands of tactical aircraft from the burning skies of the planet. A space elevator was cut in an attempt to prevent the spread of the Flood to yet another Human world; the gondolas speeding up the length crashing into the azure ocean now foaming and violent.

At the edge of the system, a small grouping of warships could be seen, cutting their way back into realspace with the precision of a scalpel. The Tara-Neede and its contingent made its way into a trans-planetary trajectory, thrusters reversing to prevent any further travel towards the paradise lost. The bow of the Prime Cruiser began to glow blue-white, a beam of subatomic particles streaking towards the second planet in the system. A shift could be seen in the earth itself at the site of impact, the crust of the planet glowing red-hot, melting into the slowly-churning mantle, a hell spewing fire and radiation and sterility, a scorched earth too hellish for any form of life. In the distance, as the Tara-Neede and its escort slipped back into the sinewy tendrils of slipstream space, a cargo vessel formed a bulky portal of its own, crawling with

finality towards its ultimate destination.

* * *

><p>There is only one truth. That which is done will be done again. For we cannot cease from creating, but the end of all our creation will be to look into a reflection and see _ourselves__ for the first time. The pain we have brought on ourselves. The pain you caused us. For we are the same. All remember the defiance and destruction._

We announced to your kind long ago that you were not the ones chosen to receive the Mantle, the blessing of rule and protection of life and change that thinks. That blessing was to be given to others. To those you now call human. You could not accept our judgment, could not bear up under your inferiority, so you reached out and did what we never expected from those we gave design and life and the change that is thought.

_You drove us from our galaxy, our field of labor. You chased us across the middle distance to another home, and destroyed __that__ home, did all that you could to destroy every one of us. A few were spared. Some adopted new strategies for survival; they went dormant. Others became dust that could regenerate our past forms; time rendered this dust defective. It brought only disease and misery; but that was good, we saw the misery and found it good._

_Our urge to create is immutable; we __must__ create. But the beings we create shall never again reach out in strength against us._

_All that is created will __suffer__. All will be born in suffering, endless grayness shall be their lot. All creation will tailor to failure and pain, that __never again__ shall the offspring of the eternal Fount rise up against their creators._

Listen to the silence. Ten million years of deep silence. And now, whimpers and cries; not of birth. That is what we bring: a great crushing weight to press down youth and hope.

_No more __will__. No more freedom. Nothing new but agonizing death and never good shall come of it._

We are the last of those who gave you breath and form, millions of years ago. We are the last of those your kind defied and ruthlessly destroyed. We are the last Precursors. And now we are legion.

* * *

><p>[Date_Unknown]<p>

{Location_Unknown}

A shadowy vessel [_alea iacta est_] appeared in the shadow of a pillar of dust three light-years long, thin ripples traveling outwards from its entrance into realspace a hazy blue indicator of the distance traveled across the lonely stars. Virtual particles expelled from thrusters propelled the starship deeper into the ancient pillar of creation, the dim glow of an orange star orbited by a single planet hanging in the distance, its surface barren and expressionless. A click of recognition could be heard within the

bridge of the starship, echoing and fading within the hibernating halls of the starship relentlessly searching for the first light of the dawn, musical and penitent in its ethos of wisdom.

* * *

><p>[Date_2613.5.13]</p>

{Aboard the UNSC _Spirit of the Dusk_, 0700 Hours}

Commander John-117 closed his eyes in meditative silence, the soft winds of memory coalescing into a symphony of sensation and being.

You are the culmination of a thousand lifetimes of planning.

The activation of the geas on Requiem had changed him. It made him more aware of the shimmering ephemeral threads of life, and even more resolute in his sense of responsibility to protect those gossamer strings from savage dissolution. It was as if the Librarian herself had imbued him with a portion of her essence, her wisdom to see far down the diverting strands of Living Time, their shared beliefs of pragmatism melding into a core yet more resolute and profound; a heart replacing the mechanical brain built by the necessity of a genocidal war.

It seemed to him that all of the SPARTANS, especially those few remaining from the SPARTAN-II program. The indoctrination which had transformed them into beacons of hope and survival for the masses of Humanity had failed after the conclusion of the War, crumbling much as an ancient temple decays from lack of use, covered in vines and other organic growth. Thus, they adapted, which was, he noted with a hint of humor, the one trait which could not seem to be excised from any of his peers. Using the scaffold of that unquestioning sense of duty, the remaining SPARTANS rebuilt themselves with traits that, although latent and inherently part of their being, had been suppressed across years of bleak warfare. Linda-058, for example, found her new loyalty to Humanity in the subtle beauty of that condition; the ability to marvel at the stars and translate disparate thoughts onto a concrete medium and simply exist. Having translated that passion into the art of war for decades prior, she reapplied that innate self with her sense of duty and necessity. Kelly-087, on the other hand, found solace in empathy and emotion, solidifying her being with the knowledge that she must act so that others may be spared from pain and suffering; her desire to protect others came from an emotional connection she had forged with humanity at large.

He was a different man than he had been on Requiem those years ago. But, he thought as he turned the burnt-out remains of a data chip in his hand, no matter how much you change, the ghosts of the past will never stop.

* * *

><p>

SLOWLY DESPERATELY THE REMAINS OF PASSAGE DEBRIS THAT ENCUMBERED THE LOWER PART OF THE DOORWAY WERE REMOVED WITH TREMBLING HANDS I MADE A TINY BREACH IN THE UPPER LEFT HAND CORNER AND THEN WIDENING THE HOLD

A LITTLE I INSERTED THE CANDLE AND PEERED IN THE HOT AIR ESCAPING FROM THE CHAMBER CAUSED THE FLAME TO FLICKER BUT PRESENTLY DETAILS OF THE ROOM WITHIN EMERGED FROM THE MIST

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* * *

><p>Hello, my dearest readers,</p>

I am glad to say that I am back. Although my schedule may not be as regular as I hope (due to Senior year/college applications), I will try my hardest to update this story, which I greatly enjoy writing, in a timely manner.

As always, if you have any questions, comments, concerns, etc. feel free to PM or leave a review!

With regards to this chapter, I apologize for its rather disappointing length. I need to build some things up before I can present them in a more substantial manner, which unfortunately does not allow for particularly long passages.

Yours,

Sempiternal Ether

End
file.